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**Exposure to Rising Societal Economic Inequality Reduces the Misperception of Racial
Economic Equality**

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STJH and JMR contributed equally and are listed alphabetically by last name. All the authors developed study concepts and contributed to study designs. Both STJH and JMR collected and analyzed the data. All authors interpreted the data. STJH, JMR, and JAR drafted the initial manuscript, and all authors provided critical revisions. All authors approved the submission of the final version of the manuscript.

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Abstract

People in the U.S. generally overestimate racial economic equality in contemporary society. A growing body of research suggests that the belief that the world is fair and just—i.e., belief in societal fairness—is a reliable predictor of the magnitude of these overestimates. The present work examined whether disrupting individuals' belief in the meritocratic opportunity structure in the U.S., via exposure to evidence of rising economic inequality, can subsequently reduce their tendency to overestimate contemporary racial economic equality. Across four studies ($N = 4,512$), including one high-powered, pre-registered replication with a nationally representative sample, we found that reminding people of rising societal economic inequality, compared with control information, led them to generate more accurate estimates of the current state of racial income and wealth equality (Studies 1 – 4). Further, restoring individuals' faith in U.S. meritocracy by informing them that social mobility in the country is still possible, despite rising economic inequality, reduced the effect of rising inequality information on racial wealth gap perceptions (Studies 3 and 4). We discuss the implications of our findings for both theory and social policy.

Keywords: racial economic inequality, economic inequality, meritocracy, racism, just world beliefs, intergroup relations, social mobility

Exposure to Rising Societal Economic Inequality Reduces the Misperception of Racial Economic Equality

Since its founding, the United States has been marred by the presence and persistence of inequality—differences in the opportunities and resources—between Black and White people. For the majority of U.S. history, Black people living in the United States have been denied full participation in the economy, and, at its worst, considered property rather than citizens, or even humans. Even after the passage of landmark federal civil rights legislation (e.g., the Civil Rights Act of 1964), there is ample evidence that income and wealth disparities between Black and White people in the U.S. have remained large or, in some cases, even increased (Bialik & Cilluffo, 2017; Derenoncourt et al., 2023; Kuhn et al., 2020). Given the magnitude and persistence of racial disparities throughout this country’s history, one might imagine that people hold a reasonably accurate perception of the extent of economic inequality between Black and White (U.S.) Americans.¹ And yet, a growing body of research suggests the opposite; Americans consistently, and in some cases dramatically, underestimate the current state of economic inequality between Black and White Americans (DeBell, 2017; Kraus et al., 2017, 2019, 2022).

In addition to documenting the extent to which people misperceive the current state of racial economic inequality, this growing body of work has also begun to uncover the socio-cognitive (Callaghan et al., 2021; Kuo et al., 2020; Onyeador et al., 2021) and motivated (Kraus et al., 2017, 2019) processes that underlie these misperceptions (see also Kraus et al., 2022). One of the most consistent predictors of overestimates of contemporary racial economic equality is the extent to which people generally perceive society as fair and just. Kraus and colleagues

¹ We use the phrases “White Americans” or “Black Americans” to refer to White and Black people residing in the U.S. While we use this language because it is common and readable, the language does not acknowledge that the U.S. is not America, and that many Americans live outside of the U.S.

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(2017), for example, found that greater belief in a “just world” (Lipkus, 1991) was associated with larger overestimates of current racial economic equality. Moreover, higher endorsement of “just-world” beliefs accounted for the tendency for higher-income White Americans to report the largest overestimates of racial economic inequality, relative to lower-income White Americans and Black Americans at any income level (Kraus et al., 2017).

Because believing the world—or at least the U.S.—is generally fair and just is inconsistent with acknowledging the role of racial discrimination in shaping individuals’ opportunities and outcomes, these beliefs may causally shape perceptions of contemporary racial economic equality. It also stands to reason that *disrupting* beliefs about societal equity in opportunities and outcomes may help to reduce overly optimistic perceptions of racial economic equality. To this end, the present research tests one such method of disrupting beliefs about societal fairness, presenting evidence of rising economic inequality, and its subsequent impact on perceptions of racial economic inequality.

Our work is informed by research by McCall and colleagues (2017), which examined the effect of exposure to evidence of rising economic inequality on attributions for economic outcomes. Specifically, they conducted a series of experiments in which they exposed three samples of American participants either to veridical information about rising societal economic inequality or neutral control information, then measured their beliefs about various determinants of economic success. They found that, compared to participants in the control condition, participants in the treatment condition rated structural factors (e.g., coming from a wealthy family) as more important, and individual factors (e.g., hard work) as less important in determining who succeeds in society. In other words, exposure to evidence of rising economic inequality led participants to show greater recognition of structural processes in shaping societal

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outcomes, a tendency associated with greater recognition of racial inequality (see Rucker & Richeson, 2021).

The current research extends from these insights in a few ways. Whereas past research (e.g., McCall et al., 2017) examined how exposure to evidence of rising economic equality shaped attributions for economic outcomes, we sought to test whether this exposure also impacts the *perceived magnitude* of inequality, and specifically, contemporary racial economic equality. We also sought to examine the implications of exposure to rising inequality on other psychological constructs theoretically linked to perceptions of racial economic equality: “just-world” beliefs (e.g., Lipkus, 1991) and perceived economic mobility (e.g., Davidai, 2018; Day & Fiske, 2017.)

Given the established relationship between greater belief in a just world and both perceptions of higher levels of economic equality, in general (García-Sánchez et al., 2022), and racial economic equality, in particular (e.g., Kraus et al., 2017), shifts in these beliefs would seem a plausible mechanism to explain the effect of exposure to rising economic inequality on perceptions of racial economic inequality. Belief in a just world has been theorized to reflect a global, epistemic need to view the world as orderly, lawful, and just in a motivated effort to assuage the threat associated with an often disordered, chaotic, and unjust reality (Furnham, 2003). Thus, if exposure to evidence suggesting rising economic inequality could sufficiently disrupt “just-world” beliefs, this might facilitate greater recognition of widespread inequities in other contexts (e.g., racial economic equality).

Evidence also suggests that the effect of exposure to rising economic inequality on estimates of racial economic equality could be explained by changes in perceived economic mobility. Along with evidence suggesting overly optimistic perceptions of economic equality,

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both in general (e.g., Norton & Ariely, 2011) and as a function of race (e.g., Kraus et al., 2019), a growing body of research has found that Americans display similarly distorted perceptions of economic mobility (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; 2018, Kraus & Tan, 2015). Similar to misperceptions of (racial) economic equality, overestimates of economic mobility have been linked to broader motives to view the world as fair and just (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015). However, in line with McCall and colleagues (2017), Davidai (2018) found that exposure to evidence of higher (vs. lower) levels of economic inequality led participants to report lower levels of belief in economic mobility. If this diminished belief in economic mobility indeed reflects a disruption in beliefs in societal fairness and justice, then this shift may also play a role in explaining the effect of exposure to rising economic equality on perceived racial economic equality.

Along with shifting in response to evidence that disrupts perceived societal equality (e.g., evidence of rising economic inequality), conversely, both just-world beliefs and economic mobility beliefs may also shift in response to evidence that *affirms* perceived equality. Consistent with this idea, in a follow-up study conducted by McCall and colleagues (2017), again included experimental conditions in which some participants were assigned to article discussing rising economic inequality, whereas others read a neutral, control article. However, this study introduced a third condition in which participants were assigned to read two articles: one focusing on rising economic inequality paired with another that highlighted a “rags-to-riches” story of an American woman who experienced upward social mobility. Participants in this third condition reported individual determinants of economic success (e.g., ambition) as more important than participants who only read about rising inequality. These latter findings suggest that although exposure to rising societal economic inequality may lower belief in a just world

and perceived ability to change an individual's economic standing, additional information regarding the possibility of social mobility can attenuate these effects, thereby restoring overly optimistic perceptions of racial economic equality.

In summary, making pervasive societal economic inequality salient may temporarily undermine, or at least attenuate, the belief that individual effort and hard work are rewarded with opportunities in the U.S. (Davidai, 2018), as well as the broader belief that the world is fair and just (Lipkus, 1991). When success is perceived to be constrained by structural factors rather than solely determined by individual effort, it likely undermines beliefs in societal fairness, as structural constraints reduce meritocracy and overall social mobility. To the extent that such societal fairness beliefs encourage overestimates of racial economic equality, as past research suggests (Kraus et al., 2017), making rising societal economic inequality salient may, in turn, reduce misperceptions.

Present Research

We conducted four experiments (including one high-powered, pre-registered replication) in which we manipulated White Americans' exposure to rising economic inequality in general (Studies 1, 3, and 4) or rising economic hardship resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Study 2), compared with neutral control information. After, we solicited participants' estimates of the extent of racial equality between Black and White Americans in terms of income and wealth, both in the past (1963) and closer to the time the data were collected (i.e., the present: 2016 in Studies 1–3 & 2019 in Study 4). Across all four studies, we examined the effects of the treatment on perceptions of present racial economic equality (e.g., Kraus et al., 2017, 2019).² We expected

² We also examine past racial economic equality alone. Analyses of overall racial economic equality, including past, present, and progress estimates, can be found in the supplement. We focus the main text on analyses involving our manipulations.

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that exposing individuals to evidence of rising *general* economic inequality in society—that is, widening inequality between the rich and the poor without any mention of race—would lead them to generate more accurate perceptions of the current state of *racial* economic equality, compared to exposure to neutral information.

To test whether this predicted effect is due, at least in part, to increased skepticism about fairness in the opportunity structure for upward mobility triggered by exposure to rising economic inequality (see again McCall et al., 2017), all studies measured participants' perceptions of just world beliefs (Lipkus, 1991) as well as perceptions of social mobility in the United States (Day & Fiske, 2017). We expected an effect of our manipulation such that information about general economic inequality would reduce perceptions of just world beliefs and social mobility. Furthermore, we hypothesized that as perceptions of just world beliefs and social mobility increased, participants would report greater overestimation of racial economic equality.

Finally, Studies 3 and 4 included a third condition to directly test the effect of coupling evidence of rising economic inequality with information designed to assuage concern about societal unfairness (i.e., evidence suggesting social mobility) on estimates of racial economic inequality. We expected that, among participants exposed to information about rising economic inequality, reassurance about continued societal mobility would generate larger overestimates of racial economic equality than among participants who did not receive this reassurance.

Table 1

Overview of Hypotheses and Main Findings Across All Four Studies

Hypotheses	Results	Explanation
H1: People will overestimate present-day racial income and	S1 – S4: Supported (see supplement)	S1 – S4: Participants overestimated 2016/2019 racial income ($ds = 0.38 - 0.62$) and wealth ($ds = 1.75 - 2.07$) equality.

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wealth equality		
H2: Exposure to rising inequality will decrease estimates of present-day racial income and wealth equality... S1 – S4: ...relative to Control Condition S3 – S4: ... relative to Assuaged Condition	S1, S4: Supported S2, S3: Partially Supported	S1: Participants reported less income ($d = 0.14$) and wealth ($d = 0.16$) equality in Rising Inequality compared to Control Condition. S2: Participants reported less wealth ($d = 0.12$) equality in Rising Inequality compared to Control Condition. S3: Participants reported less income ($d = 0.19$) equality in Rising Inequality compared to Control Condition. S4: Participants reported less income and wealth equality in Rising Inequality condition compared to both Control ($d_{\text{income}} = 0.40$; $d_{\text{wealth}} = 0.34$) and Assuaged ($d_{\text{income}} = 0.18$; $d_{\text{wealth}} = 0.22$) Conditions.
H3: People will overestimate progress towards racial income and wealth equality	S1 – S4: Supported (see supplement)	S1 – S3: Participants overestimated how much progress has been made closing the White-Black income ($ds = 0.84 - 0.94$) and wealth ($ds = 0.72 - 0.97$) gaps between 1963 and 2016/2019.
H4: Exposure to rising inequality will decrease estimates of racial economic progress S1 – S4: ...relative to Control Condition S3 – S4: ... relative to Assuaged Condition	S1, S3 – S4: Partially Supported S2: Supported (see supplement)	S1: Participants overestimated progress in closing the White-Black wealth gap ($d = 0.18$) less in the Inequality condition, but not the income gap ($d = 0.06$). S2: Participants overestimated progress in closing the White-Black income ($d = 0.16$) and wealth gaps ($d = 0.25$) less in the Inequality condition. S3 – S4: Participants overestimated progress in closing the White-Black income ($d_{S3} = 0.28$; $d_{S4} = 0.34$) and wealth gaps ($d_{S3} = 0.27$; $d_{S4} = 0.33$) less in the Inequality condition compared to the Control. Participants in the Inequality condition also overestimated wealth ($d_{S3} = 0.21$; $d_{S4} = 0.17$) progress less than participants in the Assuaged condition.
H5: Participants' just world beliefs and perceptions of social mobility will be positively associated with estimates of racial economic equality	S1 – S4: Supported	S1 – S3: Participants just world beliefs ($rs = .24 - .39$) and social mobility perceptions ($rs = .19 - .34$) were positively associated with estimates of present (2016/2019) racial economic equality.
H6: Exposure to rising inequality will decrease participants just world beliefs and perceptions of social mobility S1 – S4: ...relative to Control Condition S3 – S4: ... relative to Assuaged Condition	S1 – S2: Not Supported S3 – S4: Supported	S1 – S2: Participants in Rising Inequality and Control conditions reported the same levels of just world and social mobility beliefs. S3 – S4: Participants in Rising Inequality condition had lower levels of social mobility beliefs than participants in Control ($d_{S3} = 0.23$; $d_{S4} = 0.32$) and Assuaged Conditions ($d_{S3} = 0.49$; $d_{S4} = 0.70$). Participants in the Rising Inequality Condition also had lower just world beliefs than Participants in the Control ($d_{S3} = 0.37$; $d_{S4} = 0.26$) and Assuaged Conditions ($d_{S3} = 0.20$; $d_{S4} = 0.19$).

We report how we determined our sample size, all manipulations and exclusions, and all measures in the study either in the main text or in the supplementary materials. Table 1 provides an overview of our hypotheses and findings. The entire project, including de-identified data and analyses, is available on OSF (Studies 1–3: https://osf.io/4nhsq/?view_only=5f01071bac434e18b158aae2e4483834; Study 4: https://osf.io/zfvwj/?view_only=d73d7a8906894f66a342a68b3d391011). We pre-registered only Study 4, as it provided a high-powered, nationally representative sample with all relevant conditions. Study 4's

preregistration can also be found on OSF (https://osf.io/67j5k/overview?view_only=6c5f0121c7514b0e997729070e26cf3c).

Study 1

Study 1 investigated whether making salient rising *general* economic inequality in society reduces overestimates of current *racial* economic equality. After either reading about rising societal economic inequality (e.g., McCall et al., 2017) or a neutral control article, participants estimated the income and wealth of the average Black American family, relative to the average White family. We predicted that participants exposed to information about rising economic inequality would produce more accurate estimates of current levels of racial economic inequality, compared with participants in the control condition.³

Methods

Participants

Power analyses (Erdfelder et al., 1996) using the effect sizes reported in Kraus et al., 2017 (i.e., *ds* from 0.23 to 0.50) suggested that 300 subjects per cell was adequate to power a two-sample *t*-test (sample size ranging from 128 – 600 assuming 80% power), or a between-within ANOVA (sample size ranging from 132 – 550 to assess differences with 80% power for both the within and between factors). We were interested only in White Americans, as their perceptions of racial economic equality are more inaccurate than those of other racial groups (Kraus et al., 2017, 2019). Thus, we recruited a convenience sample of 945 White mono-racial Americans from Amazon Mechanical Turk in September of 2018 and paid them \$1.00. We did not include any checks for bots outside of Qualtrics' spam detectors. Our final sample included

³ Replicating past work (Kraus et al., 2017), in Studies 1-4 we also expected that participants would significantly overestimate present levels of Black-White equality in income and wealth, irrespective of experimental conditions. Across studies, we found support for this hypothesis and report these results in the supplement.

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884 self-identified White Americans, comprised of 350 self-identified men, 532 self-identified women, and two self-identified as nonbinary, with a mean age of 38.55, $SD = 13.04$. With such a sample size, we could detect effects as small as $d = 0.18$ using a two-tailed independent sample t -test at 80% power.

Procedure

After consenting, participants were randomly assigned to read either a report suggesting that economic inequality in society is rising (Rising Inequality condition) or an article about baseball (Control condition). Participants then read definitions of wealth and income before providing estimates of Black-White income and wealth equality, in a randomized order, for both the past (i.e., 1963) and the present (i.e., 2016). Next, they reported on their beliefs about society's progress toward racial equality more broadly, their perceptions of the current state of societal social mobility, and their belief in a just world. Participants then completed a series of exploratory questionnaires, including measures of their lay beliefs about the nature of racism, perceptions of the actual and ideal wealth distribution in the U.S., as well as the actual and ideal difference in salary between a CEO and an unskilled worker. Last, participants completed several demographic questions and were subsequently debriefed and paid for their participation. We do not discuss the exploratory measures in this paper, but they are available in the supplementary materials.

Measures and Manipulations

Rising Economic Inequality Manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to either the Rising Inequality or Control condition. Participants in the Rising Inequality condition read an article about the trend in rising economic inequality in the United States. The article,

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previously used by McCall and colleagues (2017), detailed the rise in economic inequality in American society over the past several decades (see the supplement for study materials).

Importantly, the article presented veridical information in a nonpartisan manner, did not mention race or any other social group, and did not offer any explanation or consequences of rising inequality, such as its potential effects on societal opportunity. As in McCall et al. (2017), the Control condition article reported statistics relevant to Major League Baseball, allowing for the presentation of numerical facts and statistics similar to those in the treatment article. The control article did not refer to economic inequality, social mobility, or race.

These experimental manipulation and control conditions have been extensively validated in prior research examining beliefs about societal inequality and opportunity structure (McCall et al., 2017). We have confidence in the manipulation, given that it was recently replicated by an interdisciplinary team using these identical materials in a higher-powered, independent replication sample (Holzmeister et al., 2024).

Estimates of Black-White Income and Wealth Equality. Participants responded to the following two questions for each of two time points (1963 & 2016): “For every \$100 earned by an average White family, how much do you think was earned by an average Black family? (100 would mean equality)” and “For every \$100 in wealth accumulated by an average White family, how much wealth has the average Black family accumulated?”. The two sets of questions were presented in random order across participants. The response sliders were always anchored at zero, and the sliders for each time point were presented simultaneously.

We assessed the accuracy of participants’ income and wealth estimates by comparing them to Federal benchmarks obtained from the Survey of Consumer Finances (Darity Jr et al.,

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2018). We subtracted the benchmark statistic from participants' estimates to obtain an accuracy score; greater positive numbers reflect larger *overestimates* of racial economic equality, while greater negative numbers reflect larger *underestimates* of racial economic equality (numbers close to zero reflect greater accuracy). According to the SCF, in 1963, the median income of a Black family was \$52.90 for every \$100 in income earned by the median White family. In 2016, the median Black family earned \$60.70 in income for every \$100 earned by the median White family. For wealth, in 1963, a Black family had \$5.17 for every \$100 of White wealth, while in 2016 that amount increased only to \$10.18. Descriptive statistics for each study can be found in Supplementary Table 1.

Perceived Social Mobility. We measured participants' perceptions of societal social mobility (Day & Fiske, 2017) with eight items on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree/Very Hard) to 7 (Strongly Agree/Very Easy). Sample items included "These days, how easy is it to change one's social class?" and "Most people end up staying in the same social class for their entire lives" (reverse coded). Higher scale scores corresponded to greater perceived social mobility ($\alpha = .83$).

Just World Beliefs. We measured belief in a just world with a six-item questionnaire (Lipkus, 1991), anchored from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). "I am convinced that in the long run people will be compensated for injustices" is a sample item. Higher numbers on the scale corresponded to a greater belief that the world is a fair and just place ($\alpha = .86$).

Results

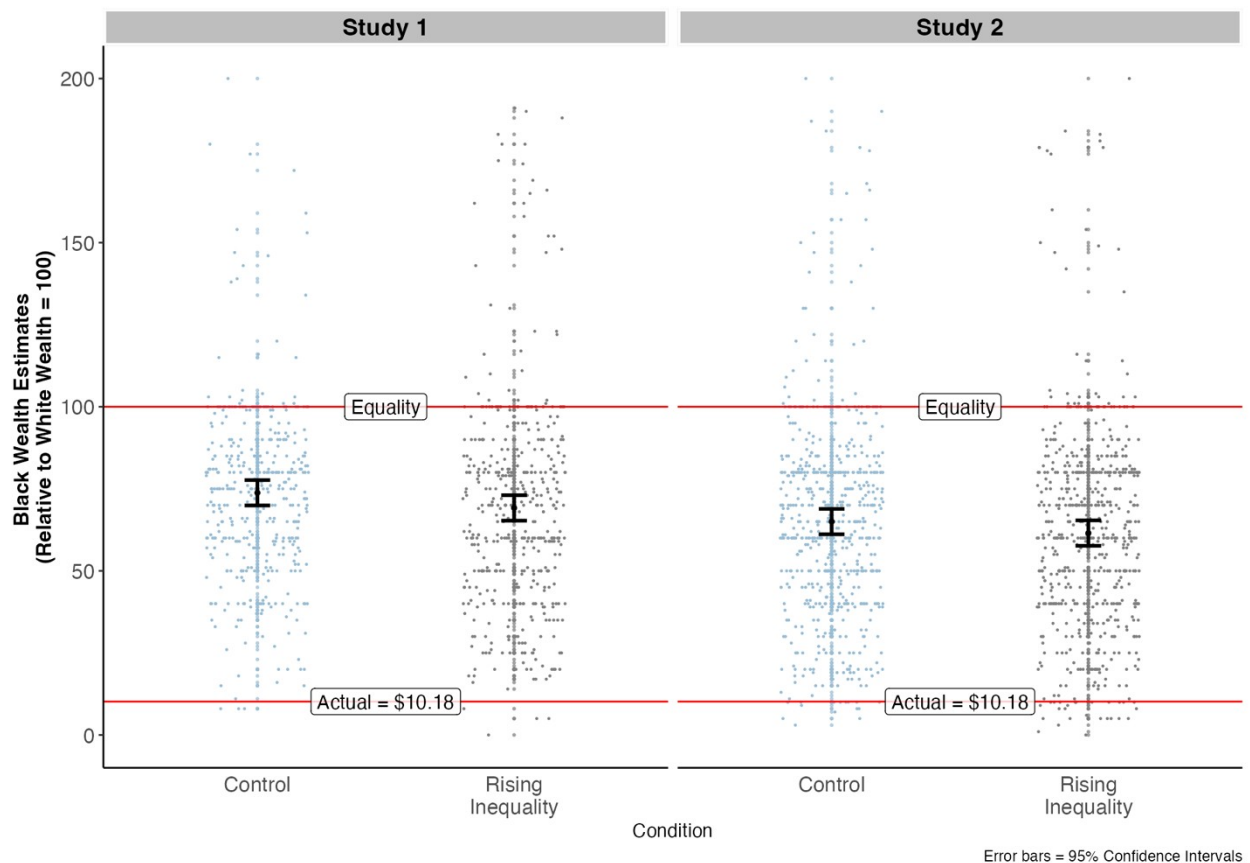
Zero-order correlations as well as the means and standard deviations for variables in all studies can be found in Supplementary Table 1.

Effects of the Rising Inequality Treatment

To assess the effect of our manipulation, we ran independent sample *t*-tests comparing estimates of present income and wealth inequality in the Rising Inequality condition with those in the Control condition (Figure 1). For both income and wealth, the condition had a significant effect. As hypothesized, participants in the Control condition reported greater income ($M = 78.62$, $SD = 23.89$; $t(873.03) = 2.16$, $p = .031$, $d = 0.14$) and wealth ($M = 73.79$, $SD = 26.39$; $t(868.87) = 2.33$, $p = .020$, $d = 0.16$) equality than participants in the Rising Inequality condition (income: $M = 74.8$, $SD = 28.71$; wealth: $M = 69.18$, $SD = 32.19$).

Figure 1

Effect of Manipulation on Present Estimates of Racial Wealth Equality for Studies 1 and 2



Social Mobility and Just World Beliefs Analyses

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We expected that perceptions of (societal) social mobility and just world beliefs would be lower in the Rising Inequality condition than in the Control condition. Contrary to expectations, beliefs about societal mobility did not differ significantly between participants in the Rising Inequality ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.04$) and Control ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.03$) conditions, $t(882) = -0.23$, $p = .817$, $d = -0.02$. Similarly, there was no effect of the Rising Inequality treatment (Control: $M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.97$; Rising Inequality: $M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.89$) on just world beliefs, $t(882) = -0.07$, $p = .943$, $d = -0.005$. However, societal mobility ($r_{\text{income}} = .30$, $r_{\text{wealth}} = .31$) and just world beliefs ($r_{\text{income}} = .33$, $r_{\text{wealth}} = .32$) were both positively correlated with estimates of 2016 racial equality, in line with expectations.

Discussion

In Study 1, we predicted and found that participants significantly overestimated the current state of Black-White economic equality, replicating past work (Davidai & Walker, 2022; Kraus et al., 2017, 2019, 2022). Drawing on the research by McCall and colleagues (2017), we further investigated whether exposure to rising economic inequality in society would temper these misperceptions (i.e., overestimates), given the putative role that belief in societal fairness plays in motivating the misperception of racial economic equality. Consistent with predictions, compared with control information, exposure to the Rising Inequality information reduced participants' estimates of present income and wealth equality. However, exposure to rising economic inequality did not significantly affect participants' self-reported social mobility or just world beliefs.

This pattern of results is surprising given the initial validation and replication of this experimental paradigm (McCall et al., 2017; Holzmeister et al., 2024), past scholarship, and our own expectations (Day & Fiske, 2017), and so we sought to further test these relationships in

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subsequent studies. Before attempting to illuminate the mechanisms underlying these effects, especially given the null effects on measures closely related to the presumed mechanism (i.e., social mobility & fairness beliefs) in Study 2, we sought to replicate the basic findings with a different manipulation of rising economic inequality.

Study 2

Study 2 sought to conceptually replicate Study 1 with a different manipulation of exposure to rising societal economic inequality, namely an article on the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Americans' economic well-being. We predicted that exposure to increasing societal economic inequality due to COVID-19 would again lead to more accurate perceptions of the current state of racial economic equality, conceptually replicating the main findings of Study 1.

Methods

Participants

Using the *SIMR* package in *R* (Green & MacLeod, 2016), we calculated the sample size needed to achieve 80% power to detect the wealth effect found in Study 1, which was roughly 1150 participants. Thus, we recruited 1300 White participants from Prolific.co in October of 2020 and paid them \$1.00 for their time. Participants were initially screened for attention through a question that required them to answer a word riddle. Participants who failed this question never saw the consent document and did not complete any survey questions. After removing spam participants, participants who did not pass an attention check (i.e., "How many fatal heart attacks did you have"), participants who did not solely identify as White, and participants who admitted they did not pay attention while completing the study, we ended up with a sample of 1258 White Americans, of which 594 self-identified as men, 645 self-identified as women, and 19 identified

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as “something not listed” ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.76$, $SD = 12.34$). With 629 participants in each condition, we could detect effects as small as $d = 0.16$ using a two-tailed independent sample t -test at 80% power.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to that described in Study 1 (just world beliefs, $\alpha = .87$; social mobility, $\alpha = .89$), save for the different content of the Rising Inequality treatment article. Specifically, participants in the Rising Inequality condition read an article titled, “Extreme inequality was the pre-existing condition: How COVID-19 widened America’s wealth gap.” The article reported on evidence of how the wealthiest members of the nation profited during the pandemic, while those at the bottom of the wealth distribution suffered. Similar to the treatment article used in Study 1, a graph depicting the rise of income inequality from 1968 to 2018 was included. Importantly, the article did not mention race in any way (e.g., there was no mention of racially disparate COVID-19 health outcomes), nor did it mention societal opportunity/upward mobility.

Results

The descriptive statistics for all measures are again reported in Supplementary Table 1.

Effects of the Rising Inequality Treatment

We again conducted independent samples t -tests to examine the impact of the Rising Inequality condition on estimates of racial income and wealth equality. Unlike Study 1, the manipulation did not influence estimates of present income equality, $t(1250.87) = 1.12$, $p = .263$, $d = 0.06$. Participants in the Control condition ($M = 71.23$, $SD = 24.66$) reported similar amounts of present income equality as participants in the Rising Inequality condition ($M = 69.62$, $SD =$

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26.29). However, the pattern regarding wealth equality matched hypotheses, $t(1254.67) = 2.05$, $p = .041$, $d = 0.12$ (see Figure 1). Participants in the control condition ($M = 65.02$, $SD = 29.83$) estimated more equality than participants in the Rising Inequality condition ($M = 61.52$, $SD = 30.81$).

Social Mobility and Just World Beliefs

We again expected that perceptions of (societal) social mobility and just world beliefs would be lower in the Rising Inequality condition than in the Control condition. As in Study 1, yet contrary to expectations, the Rising Inequality manipulation did not affect ratings on the social mobility beliefs measure (Rising Inequality: $M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.14$; Control: $M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(1254.9) = 0.92$, $p = .357$, $d = 0.05$. Similarly, the manipulation did not affect participants' self-reported just world beliefs (Rising Inequality: $M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.02$; Control: $M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.04$), $t(1254.6) = 0.90$, $p = .368$, $d = 0.05$. In line with expectations, though, societal mobility ($r_{\text{income}} = .34$, $r_{\text{wealth}} = .38$) and just world beliefs ($r_{\text{income}} = .39$, $r_{\text{wealth}} = .39$) were both positively correlated with estimates of 2016 racial equality.

Discussion

The present findings complement those of Study 1, suggesting that exposure to rising societal economic inequality can temper White Americans' tendency to overestimate current racial wealth equality. That the inequality exposure article pertained to the exacerbating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on societal inequality suggests this period may have been a moment in which Americans were more willing to accept the harsh reality that racial economic equality persists in contemporary society, at least compared to their general unwillingness in the recent past (see e.g. Callaghan et al., 2021). That is, presenting people with information about how the

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pandemic exacerbated already profound levels of economic inequality in America led them to generate more accurate perceptions of gaps in present-day racial wealth equality.

What remains puzzling, however, is the mechanism underlying these effects. We began this work based on evidence from McCall and colleagues (2017) that exposure to rising societal economic inequality increased skepticism about the opportunity structure in society, which, in turn, led people to perceive and perhaps acknowledge societal inequality based on race and other social categories. Despite this presumed mechanism, in our initial two studies, exposure to the inequality treatment did not successfully reduce perceptions of social mobility or belief in a just world, compared with the control information. Because perceptions of mobility and just world beliefs were framed in general terms in Studies 1 and 2, they may not have been sensitive to our specific manipulation of Rising Inequality, or they may have generated reactance in some participants. Perhaps addressing any potential threat from information on rising inequality might elicit more uniform responses from participants.

Further, while there was no evidence from these first two studies that exposure to rising economic inequality in society reduced participants' belief that individual social mobility—i.e., some people's opportunity to get ahead in society— may be hampered by unfair disadvantages linked to group memberships, just world beliefs and social mobility beliefs were consistently *positively* correlated with estimates of racial income and wealth equality (see Supplementary Table 1). That is, consistent with the logic underlying this work, the more participants reported holding just world beliefs and that social mobility in society was possible, the more they tended to overestimate racial economic equality.

Study 3

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The prior two studies revealed that exposure to information about rising societal inequality tempered overestimates of current racial wealth equality. Study 3 sought to test the role of beliefs in societal fairness in the emergence of these effects. Specifically, in addition to the Rising Inequality and Control conditions used in the prior studies, Study 3 included a third condition in which any concerns about societal fairness triggered by exposure to the information in the Rising Inequality condition were explicitly *assuaged*. In other words, if the effect of exposure to rising societal economic inequality results in more accurate estimates of racial economic equality because it increases skepticism about the opportunity to succeed in society due to structural barriers, then assuaging these concerns should result in estimates of racial economic equality that are more similar to those produced by participants in the control condition. And indeed, the presence of moderate social mobility information (compared to low levels of social mobility) increases just world beliefs (Day & Fiske, 2017), suggesting that social mobility information will effectively undermine our intervention and turn it “off”. The present study tested this possibility.

Methods

Participants

The sample size was determined as described in Study 1, suggesting we needed 300 subjects per cell to adequately power a one-way ANOVA with three conditions. We recruited a convenience sample of 964 Americans from Amazon Mechanical Turk in April of 2019; however, we inadvertently forgot to recruit only White Americans. When we excluded those who did not self-identify as monoracially White, our final sample comprised 647 White Americans (309 men and 338 women) with a mean age of 39.44 ($SD = 12.83$). We did not have

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any checks for bots outside of Qualtrics' spam detectors. With this sample size, we can detect a f value of 0.12 or greater with 80% power using a one-way ANOVA with three factors.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: 1) Rising Inequality, 2) Assuaged Concerns, and 3) Control. The Rising Inequality and Control conditions were identical to those described in Study 1. Participants in the third, Assuaged Concerns, condition first read the same article used in the Rising Inequality condition, followed by additional information designed to assuage any concerns about the opportunity structure in society (Day & Fiske, 2017). Specifically, participants in this condition were told that “Although only 5% make it to the very top, many are able to make changes, and 66% – the vast majority – improve their incomes compared to their parents.” In other words, the article emphasized that although the gap between the rich and poor has been, and is, increasing in society, social mobility is still possible. McCall and colleagues used a similar manipulation (i.e., the “American Dream”) but focused on the story of a singular individual in a classic “rags to riches” dynamic. Their manipulation did not influence structural factors to getting ahead, which is why we included broader information about social mobility to strengthen the effect.

After the manipulation, the procedures were identical to those described in Study 1 (just world beliefs, $\alpha = .87$; social mobility, $\alpha = .88$).

Results

Once again, the means and standard deviations for all variables are reported in Table 1.

Effect of the Rising Inequality Treatments

We submitted participants' present racial income and wealth equality estimates to one-way (3 Condition: Rising Inequality, Assuaged Concerns, Control) ANOVAs. We did not find an

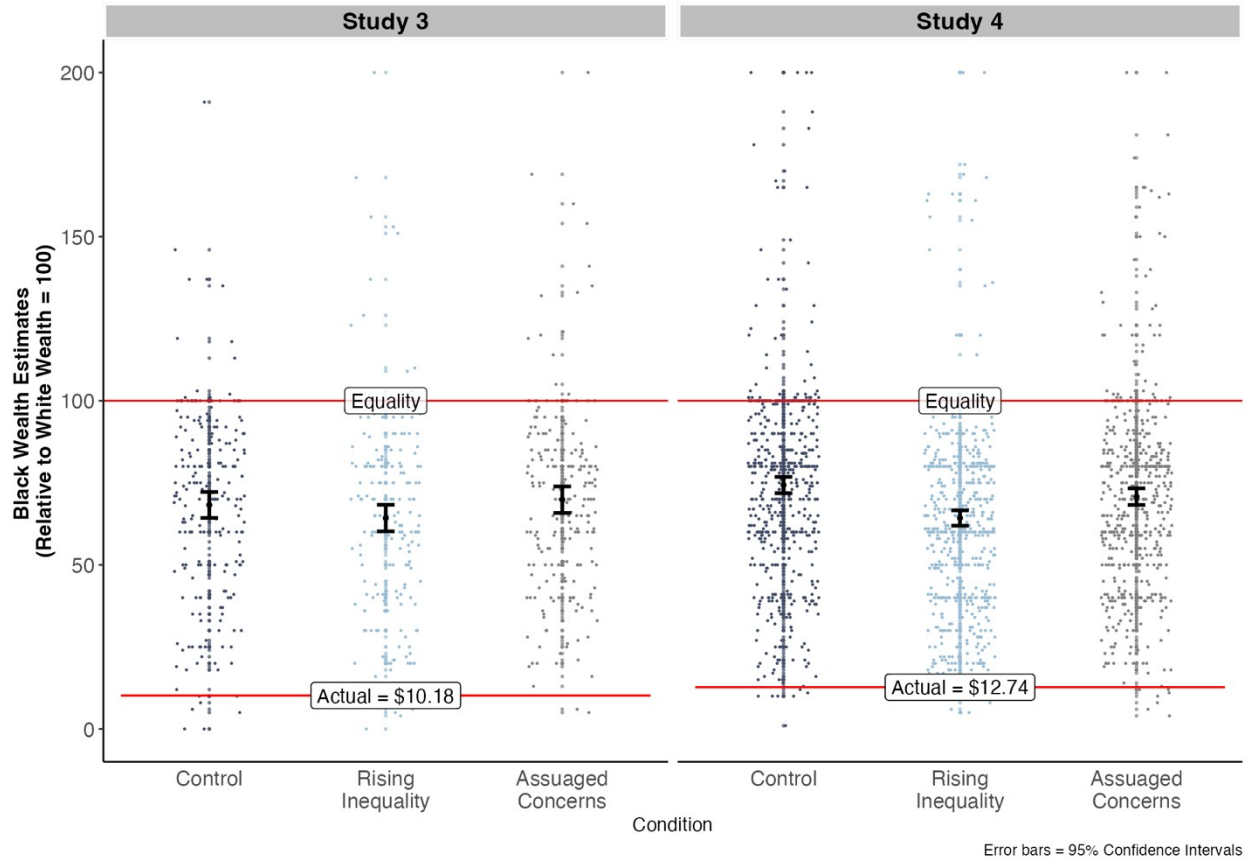
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effect of our manipulation on present *income* estimates, $F(2, 644) = 2.21, p = .111$. However, in line with hypotheses, planned pairwise comparisons showed that participants in the Rising Inequality condition reported less present income equality ($M = 72.17, SD = 29.68$) than participants in the Control condition ($M = 77.46, SD = 24.67$), $t(644) = 2.02, p = .044, d = 0.19$. As expected, there was no difference between participants in the Control condition and participants in the Assuaged Opportunity Concerns condition ($M = 76.18, SD = 27.24$), $t(644) = 0.49, p = .624, d = 0.05$. Participants in the Rising Inequality condition also reported the same amount of present income equality as participants in the Assuaged Opportunity Concerns condition, $t(644) = -1.52, p = .130, d = -0.15$.

Analyses of present racial wealth equality estimates revealed the same non-significant main effect of condition, $F(2, 644) = 1.96, p = .142$ (Figure 2). However, unlike income estimates, none of the planned pairwise comparisons were significant. Participants in the Rising Inequality condition ($M = 64.26, SD = 31.70$) reported the same level of present wealth equality as participants in the Control condition ($M = 68.26, SD = 29.19$), $t(644) = -1.39, p = .166, d = -0.13$, and in the Assuaged Opportunity Concerns condition ($M = 69.85, SD = 29.09$), $t(644) = -1.92, p = .055, d = -0.19$.

Figure 2

Effect of Manipulation on Present Estimates of Racial Wealth Equality for Studies 3 and 4



Social Mobility and Just World Beliefs Analyses. As with past studies, societal mobility ($r_{\text{income}} = .24$, $r_{\text{wealth}} = .30$) and just world beliefs ($r_{\text{income}} = .25$, $r_{\text{wealth}} = .26$) were both positively correlated with estimates of 2016 racial equality. However, we wanted to examine whether our manipulation directly influenced participants' social mobility and just world beliefs. As expected, participants' social mobility beliefs differed by condition, $F(2, 644) = 12.63$, $p < .001$. Participants in the Rising Inequality condition reported the lowest level social mobility ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.16$) compared to participants in the Control condition ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(644) = 2.36$, $p = .019$, $d = -0.22$, who then reported less social mobility than participants in the Assuaged Concerns condition ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(644) = -2.72$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.27$. As expected, participants in the Rising Inequality condition also perceived less social mobility than participants in the Assuaged Concerns condition, $t(644) = -5.02$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.49$.

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We also examined the impact of our manipulation on participants' just world beliefs using a one-way ANOVA, which was significant, $F(2, 644) = 7.28, p < .001$. Similar to social mobility beliefs, participants in the Rising Inequality condition ($M = 3.28, SD = 0.99$) endorsed just world beliefs more than participants in the Control condition ($M = 3.64, SD = 1.04; t(644) = 3.81, p < .001, d = 0.37$) and those in the Assuaged Concerns condition ($M = 3.48, SD = 0.91; t(644) = 2.09, p = .037, d = 0.20$). However, just world beliefs reported by participants in the Assuaged Concerns condition and Control condition did not differ significantly, $t(644) = 1.69, p = .091, d = 0.16$.

Discussion

Study 3 tested whether exposure to rising societal economic inequality leads people to generate more accurate estimates of contemporary racial economic equality, compared with control information, because the inequality information dampens their belief that the opportunity structure in society is fair and just—specifically, that anyone has an opportunity to succeed if they simply work hard. To test this idea, we informed some participants who were exposed to the rising societal inequality information that social mobility in society remains strong nonetheless (i.e., Assuaged Concerns condition) and compared their estimates of racial economic equality to estimates generated by participants exposed to the rising inequality information alone (as well as control participants).

The pattern of results was somewhat mixed, perhaps due to the insufficient sample size. However, the patterns for present income estimates were in line with hypotheses, if ultimately non-significant.

Study 4

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The results of Study 3 provided some evidence consistent with predictions and, importantly, shed light on the mechanisms thought to underlie the effects observed in Studies 1 and 2. Nonetheless, we were keen to replicate the study, given the generally low power due to an error in participant recruitment, which may have contributed to some of the weak effects. To that end, in Study 4, we conducted a high-powered, preregistered replication of Study 3 on a sample of White American adults representative of the U.S. in terms of age, gender, education, and income, allowing us to test the robustness of the findings. The preregistration can be found on OSF at https://osf.io/67j5k/overview?view_only=6c5f0121c7514b0e997729070e26cf3c.

Methods

Participants

Our sample size was determined again using the SIMR package in *R*, this time based on the wealth progress effect (see supplementary materials) found in Study 3. We calculated a need for 500 subjects per condition to achieve 80% power. Given this study has three conditions, we aimed to recruit 1600 White U.S. Americans to have 1500 usable data points. We recruited participants through Qualtrics Panels (<https://www.qualtrics.com>) in February of 2022 and selected a sample that was nationally representative of the White American adult population with respect to age, gender, education, and income. Qualtrics Panels has robust checks to ensure high data quality (e.g., minimal bots). We recruited 1870 participants at the conclusion of the study. After removing participants who did not identify as solely White (and non-Hispanic), failed an attention check (indicating “5” on a 1 – 7 scale), and indicated they did not complete the study carefully, we were left with a total of 1723 suitable participants. The sample consisted of 822 men and 901 women (52.29%). The median response on the household income was a “3”, or “\$40,001–\$60,000”. In terms of age, the mean of the sample was 51.32, $SD = 17.67$. With this

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sample size, we can detect a f value of 0.07 or greater with 80% power using a one-way ANOVA with three factors.

Procedure

The procedure and measures (just world beliefs, $\alpha = .83$; social mobility, $\alpha = .86$) were identical to those described in Study 3, with one change. We updated the questions regarding “present” levels of income and wealth equality to 2019 rather than 2016, to better reflect the year participants completed the study (and for which benchmark Federal data were available). According to the Survey of Consumer Finances, in 2019, Black families made \$58.82 in income and had \$12.74 in wealth, for every \$100 in income and wealth, respectively, held by White families.

Results

The means and standard deviations for all variables are reported in Supplementary Table 1.

Effect of the Inequality Treatments

As in Study 3, we ran one-way ANOVAs assessing the effect of condition on participants’ present income and wealth estimates.⁴ First examining 2019 income estimates, we found a main effect of condition, $F(2, 1720) = 23.89, p < .001$. As hypothesized, participants in the Rising Inequality condition ($M = 70.28, SD = 28.20$) reported less present income equality than participants in the Control condition ($M = 80.80, SD = 24.79$), $t(1720) = 6.91, p < .001, d = 0.40$, and in the Assuaged Concerns condition ($M = 75.10, SD = 24.95$), $t(1720) = -3.14, p = .002, d = -0.18$. Participants’ present income estimates in the Assuaged Concerns condition

⁴ We pre-registered running multilevel models but for clarity (and consistency with previous studies), we continued to report one-way ANOVAs. The multilevel models are in the supplement.

were significantly lower than participants' estimates in the Control condition, $t(1720) = 3.61, p < .001, d = 0.22$, suggesting that the introduction of social mobility information did not completely negate the inequality manipulation.

We found similar effects for present wealth estimates, $F(2, 1719) = 17.26, p < .001$ (see Figure 2). As hypothesized, participants in the Rising Inequality condition ($M = 64.27, SD = 30.21$) reported less present wealth equality than participants in the Control condition ($M = 74.32, SD = 29.99$), $t(1719) = 5.76, p < .001, d = 0.34$, and in the Assuaged Concerns condition ($M = 70.79, SD = 29.55$), $t(1719) = -3.71, p < .001, d = -0.22$. Unlike 2019 income estimates, participants' 2019 wealth estimates in the Assuaged Concerns condition were not significantly different from those in the Control condition, $t(1719) = 1.95, p = .051, d = 0.12$.

Social Mobility and Just World Beliefs Analyses

We again analyzed participants' social mobility and just world beliefs measures. As with all past studies, societal mobility ($r_{\text{income}} = .19, r_{\text{wealth}} = .26$) and just world beliefs ($r_{\text{income}} = .24, r_{\text{wealth}} = .28$) were both positively correlated with estimates of 2019 racial equality. Our manipulation also influenced these beliefs. As in Study 3, participants' social mobility beliefs differed by condition, $F(2, 1720) = 71.50, p < .001$. Specifically, the social mobility beliefs of participants in the Assuaged Concerns condition ($M = 4.16, SD = 0.87$) were significantly higher than those of participants in both the Rising Inequality condition ($M = 3.45, SD = 1.10$), $t(1720) = -11.96, p < .001, d = -0.70$, and participants in the Control condition ($M = 3.77, SD = 1.04$), $t(1720) = 11.96, p < .001, d = 0.39$. Replicating Study 3, participants in the Rising Inequality condition also reported lower social mobility beliefs than participants in the Control condition, $t(1720) = 5.42, p < .001, d = 0.32$.

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Examining the impact of our manipulation on participants' just world beliefs, we find the same pattern as in Study 3, $F(2, 1720) = 11.06, p < .001$. Consistent with predictions, participants in the Rising Inequality condition ($M = 3.24, SD = 0.92$) endorsed just world beliefs to a lower extent compared with participants in either the Control condition ($M = 3.48, SD = 0.90$), $t(1720) = 4.52, p < .001, d = 0.26$, or participants in the Assuaged Concerns condition ($M = 3.42, SD = 0.95$), $t(1720) = 3.27, p = .001, d = 0.19$. The level of belief in a just world reported by participants in the Assuaged Concerns and Control conditions did not significantly differ, $t(1720) = 1.18, p = .239, d = 0.07$.

Discussion

Building on the preliminary findings from Study 3, Study 4 offered compelling evidence for the primary predictions of this work using a preregistered experiment and a representative sample of White Americans. Most notably, participants in the Rising Inequality condition generated lower estimates of current (i.e., 2019) racial income and wealth equality compared with participants in the Control condition, as well as compared with participants who were exposed to the same information about rising societal economic inequality, but had concerns about social mobility assuaged (i.e., the Assuaged Concerns condition). In other words, consistent with McCall et al. (2017), exposure to information about rising economic inequality in society appears to increase Americans' skepticism about the opportunity structure in society, which is reflected in their perceptions of contemporary racial economic equality.

It is also interesting that participants' estimates of racial economic equality in the Assuaged Concerns condition consistently fell between those generated by participants in the Rising Inequality and control conditions, even though participants' social mobility beliefs were highest in the Assuaged Concerns condition. This suggests that the exposure to persistent rising

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economic inequality may affect perceptions of racial equality through a mechanism other than its effects on perceptions of social mobility. Future research is needed to examine this possibility. Nonetheless, this high-powered, pre-registered study fielded on a nationally-representative sample of White American adults offers compelling experimental evidence that the belief that society offers people a fair opportunity to succeed if they work hard, irrespective of their racial and other social group memberships, underlies, at least in part, the misperception of racial economic equality.

General Discussion

Across four studies, we sought to examine the causal impact of exposure to evidence of rising societal economic inequality on White Americans' tendency to overestimate *racial* economic equality. In each study, we exposed White American participants to information about the fact of increasing economic inequality in society, which has been found in prior work (McCall et al., 2017) to lead to greater skepticism about the opportunity structure in society. Compared with exposure to neutral control information, participants in the rising inequality condition consistently generated lower estimates of contemporary racial economic equality between Black and White Americans. Consistent with predictions, increasing skepticism about the opportunity structure in society led participants to temper their perceptions of racial economic equality.

Surprisingly, neither Study 1 nor Study 2 provided evidence for this putative mechanism on the self-report measures of either social mobility beliefs or just-world beliefs. That is, these measures did not differ across the experimental conditions. Because they were consistently positively correlated with individuals' racial equality estimates, however, we sought to test the predicted mechanism experimentally in Studies 3 and 4. In addition to the Rising Inequality and

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Control conditions, we exposed a third group of participants (Assuaged Concerns condition) to the same information as the Rising Inequality condition, but included an explicit mention that social mobility in society continues to be possible. Not surprisingly, we expected perceptions of social mobility in society to be preserved in this Assuaged Concerns condition, relative to the Rising Inequality condition, and, thus, expected estimates of racial economic equality in this condition to be larger (more optimistic & inaccurate) as well.

These results offer compelling evidence that perceived opportunity in society is an important mechanism in shaping people's perceptions of and beliefs about societal racial economic equality. We want to note that providing information about social mobility to obviate the effect of rising inequality helps clarify our purported mechanism. However, the appropriate *policy* response to rising inequality should not be to simply reassure citizens that social mobility is attainable, especially since not only is social mobility declining (Chetty et al., 2017), but there are racial differences in social mobility attainment (Chetty et al., 2020; Davidai & Walker, 2022).

Implications

The present research demonstrated that exposure to information about rising societal economic inequality (vs. neutral control information) led to more accurate estimates of racial economic equality (Kraus et al., 2017; 2019). These findings suggest that presenting information that may undermine legitimizing myths concerning societal equality (e.g., just-world and economic mobility beliefs) may lead Americans to be more reflective in considering how race (and other categories) may differentially shape individuals' opportunities and outcomes. Indeed, recent work by Callaghan and colleagues (2021) found that participants who received data about the structural underpinnings of racial inequality tended to generate more accurate estimates of contemporary racial wealth equality. Consistent with this idea, preliminary research finds that

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informing White Americans about structural forms of racism in the past—e.g., redlining practices that devalued real estate in Black neighborhoods—leads to the generation of more accurate estimates of contemporary racial wealth equality, compared with exposure to information about interpersonal racism (Rucker et al. 2025). Additional research is needed to examine the veracity of this idea and, further, to find ways to increase awareness of the roots of racial wealth inequality to bring individuals' beliefs about its current state into better alignment with reality.

We also observed that the effect of exposure to rising economic inequality led to more accurate (i.e., less overly optimistic) perceptions of racial economic equality through reducing perceptions of individual social mobility (McCall et al., 2017). Previous research has found that people, especially White Americans, routinely overestimate the amount of social mobility that is possible in U.S. society overall (Kraus & Tan, 2015). The present findings build on this past research by demonstrating that the belief, or lack thereof, in the possibility of individual economic mobility also plays a key role in shaping how much White Americans connect information about broader economic inequality to patterns of racial economic equality. Perhaps exposure to information about the fact that inequality is rising reduced participants' defensiveness and system-justifying sensemaking regarding societal fairness (Day & Fiske, 2017), allowing them to generate and accept a more accurate picture of the current state of racial economic equality.

Limitations & Future Directions

While compelling, the present work has several limitations that invite exciting new directions of research. First, recall that we sought to examine whether, and through which mechanism(s), exposure to evidence of rising societal economic inequality impacts White

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Americans' tendency to overestimate the current state of racial economic equality. Specifically, building from previous research by McCall and colleagues (2017), we tested the impact of exposure to evidence of economic inequality on two additional psychological constructs theoretically linked to beliefs about societal inequality: just-world beliefs and perceived economic mobility. We theorized that responses to both of these measures would serve as useful indicators of whether our inequality exposure manipulation "disrupted" prevailing beliefs about societal fairness and, in turn, would help to explain the link between exposure to economic inequality and perceptions of racial economic equality. Although our findings offered some evidence in line with this theoretical account, further work is needed to better understand the form and function of these proposed mechanisms.

For example, we observed somewhat inconsistent effects of our experimental manipulation of just-world beliefs, with significant effects only in Studies 3 and 4. Given that just-world beliefs are theorized to be quite malleable and resistant to change (Furnham, 2003), future work is needed to identify the most reliable, effective methods of disrupting just-world beliefs to facilitate greater recognition of racial economic inequality. Further, given the theorized function of just-world beliefs as a means of ascribing a sense of moral order to a chaotic world, future work should also examine whether successfully disrupting these beliefs may also impact their comparatively adaptive functions (e.g., associations with greater life satisfaction and well-being; see Furnham, 2003) and how they cohere with greater acknowledgment of intergroup inequity.

Moreover, regarding the role of perceived economic mobility, the measures we used to gauge these perceptions were drawn from research by Day and Fiske (2017). These specific measures sought to capture participants' beliefs about the *possibility* of socioeconomic mobility.

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In future work, however, it may be beneficial to further disentangle the implications of beliefs about the possibility of mobility from attributions concerning *why* or *how* individuals may change their socioeconomic standing. Consistent with this idea, Davidai (2018) found that the effect of exposure to high (vs. low) levels of economic inequality on lower perceptions of economic mobility was explained by greater attribution of economic outcomes to external, rather than internal factors. Building on this evidence, future research could examine the extent to which attributions regarding the causes of economic outcomes align with the perceived causes of economic mobility, and to what extent either set of attributions may shape perceptions of racial economic inequality.

Second, although it is important for research to further elucidate the socio-cognitive and motivational underpinnings of misperceptions of racial economic equality, it may be even more important to consider the downstream consequences of overestimating the current state of racial economic equality. Specifically, research needs to demonstrate the links between these overestimates and support for relevant equity-enhancing policies. Much of the recent research examining these misperceptions is guided by an assumption that more accurate perceptions of the current state of racial disparities are a necessary (but not sufficient) first step toward implementing policies designed to address them. To our knowledge, little research has examined whether more accurate perceptions of racial economic equality predict such policy support, and the work that has addressed this question has offered only modest support for the premise (Callaghan et al., 2021). In other words, it remains unclear whether altering perceptions of racial economic equality leads to increased support for policies designed to increase racial equality. Moreover, there is no reason to expect that exposure to information about rising economic inequality in society—as provided in this work—will necessarily lead White Americans to

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support policies targeting racial economic inequality. Indeed, such information could lead members of this group to assume a defensive posture designed to maintain the current racial hierarchy (Cooley et al., 2024; Richeson et al., 2025), especially if social mobility is perceived as an entitlement that is exclusive to White people in the country (Cooley et al., 2019).

Third, it is important to note that the present effects emerged despite the societal inequality treatment information having no explicit mention of race or racial disparities. That is, White Americans in our samples were able and willing to generate more accurate estimates of racial economic equality after exposure to information about rising societal inequality that did not explicitly invoke race or group memberships. We do not know whether similar treatments that included specific information regarding rising inequality across or perhaps within racial groups would yield similar results. Indeed, it is possible that such detailed information could backfire by increasing individuals' desire to defend the system (c.f. Callaghan et al., 2021).

Relatedly, we only examined the role of just-world and economic mobility beliefs in shaping the misperceptions of racial economic equality among White Americans. This was simply a choice designed to focus attention on the group that tends to generate the most inaccurate estimates of racial economic equality (Kraus et al., 2017) and, thus, may be most susceptible to the intervention. Future research should carefully examine for whom and perhaps through what mechanisms information that explicitly connects societal economic inequality with racial economic inequality will be effective in increasing accuracy regarding the current state of racial economic inequality and, further, promote support for policies designed to attenuate it (Burns et al., 2025). For example, do other racial groups, such as Black Americans, show the same relationship between social mobility and racial equality? Does social mobility mediate the relationship between rising inequality and perceptions of racial economic equality between

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White and Latino or Asian Americans? The racial positioning of Asian Americans as “model minorities” (Yip et al., 2021) might alter the role that social mobility has on perceptions of racial economic equality, as Asian Americans are already perceived as being upwardly mobile within society, even more so than White Americans as a whole.

Last, the politicization of race within the United States changed drastically over the course of this research project (and continues to do so). Interest in addressing racial disparities increased exponentially in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd and then sharply took a turn in 2024 with the election of Donald Trump, who quickly focused on eliminating programs aimed at addressing inequalities. Public opinion regarding diversity, discrimination, and inequality has also shifted. In 2019, 75% of American adults said that companies should promote racial diversity within the workplace; in 2025, that number dropped to 64%, with the greatest decrements among Republicans (Hurst, 2026). Thus, the very importance of race as an organizing force within society is shifting. Future research should consider the importance of context in shaping the extent to which perceptions of societal social mobility promote overestimates of racial economic equality; for example, does the relationship between social mobility and racial economic equality change based on public opinions about race or broader social movements like #BlackLivesMatter? These shifts could simultaneously bring greater attention to racial disparities or dampen appetites to address them.

Conclusions

Although the United States has made meaningful progress towards racial equality on several markers of well-being, massive racial disparities continue to characterize contemporary society. One of the largest and most obstinate of these disparities is the profound gap in economic outcomes between Black and White Americans (Bialik & Cilluffo, 2017;

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Derenoncourt et al., 2023; Kuhn et al., 2020). And yet, despite the extent of these disparities, Americans, especially White Americans, consistently overestimate contemporary levels of economic parity between Black and White Americans, as well as the extent to which these racial economic gaps have been reduced from the past to the present day. The present research suggests that exposure to evidence of rising societal economic equality undermines belief in a just world and in the possibility of individual economic mobility, which, as a result, tempers White Americans' tendency to overestimate levels of racial economic equality. This research contributes to a growing literature (e.g., Callaghan et al., 2021; Kraus et al., 2017; 2019; Onyeador et al., 2021) examining the psychological processes shaping how individuals perceive and make sense of profound racial economic disparities which are endemic to the United States. It is critical that we better understand the drivers of these misperceptions of racial economic equality to find the most effective ways to bring them closer to reality.

Open Practices

Materials, data, and data syntax are available on the Open Science Framework (osf.io: https://osf.io/4nhsq/?view_only=5f01071bac434e18b158aae2e4483834 and https://osf.io/zfvwj/overview?view_only=d73d7a8906894f66a342a68b3d391011). Study 4's preregistration can be found at https://osf.io/67j5k/overview?view_only=6c5f0121c7514b0e997729070e26cf3c.

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