
NEOLIBERALISM AND THE IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF EQUITY BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT

Researchers across disciplines, including psychology, have sought to understand how people evaluate the fairness of resource distributions. Equity, defined as proportionality of rewards to merit, has dominated the conceptualization of distributive justice in psychology, with some scholars casting it as the primary basis on which distributive decisions are made. The present paper acts as a corrective to this disproportionate emphasis on equity. Drawing on findings from different subfields, we argue that people possess a range of beliefs about how valued resources should be allocated—beliefs that vary systematically across developmental stages, relationship types, and societies. By reinvigorating notions of distributive justice put forth by the field’s pioneers, we further argue that prescriptive beliefs concerning resource allocation are ideological formations embedded in socioeconomic and historical contexts. Fairness beliefs at the micro-level are thus shaped by those beliefs’ macro-level instantiations. In a novel investigation of this process, we consider neoliberalism, the globally-dominant socioeconomic model of the past forty years. Using data from more than 160 countries, we uncover evidence that neoliberal economic structures shape equity-based distributive beliefs at the individual level. We conclude by advocating an integrative approach to the study of distributive justice that bridges micro- and macro-level analyses.

Keywords Distributive Justice · Equity · Equality · Neoliberalism · Ideology

Scholars from a range of disciplines, including philosophy, economics, sociology, and psychology, have long sought to understand how people make distributive decisions in resource-allocation contexts. Which justice principles do we employ in evaluating whether a distribution is fair? In justice reasoning based on the *equity*¹ rule, resources and rewards (“outcomes”) are shared according to the merits of the members—that is, in proportion to each individual’s “inputs” to the system or collective. An individual’s merit, in turn, can be assessed along a number of dimensions, such as effort, ability, or productivity. In the psychological sciences, the equity rule has often been given primacy as the allocation principle most often undergirding human fairness perceptions (e.g., J. S. Adams, 1965; Graham et al., 2013; Hatfield & Walster, 1975; Homans, 1974; Starmans et al., 2017). The present article is intended as a corrective to this (often tacit) assumption. We argue that distributive beliefs are diverse and heavily contingent on the social and ideological systems in which people are embedded.

¹Other terms—such as merit, desert, proportionality, reciprocity, responsibility, and differentiation—have also been used to refer to equity in various literatures.

In this article, we review psychological literature suggesting that distributive beliefs vary considerably across developmental stages, persons, cultures, and economic structures. Further, we present evidence to suggest that equity beliefs are products of ideologies² embedded in social and economic institutions. In an empirical demonstration of this process, we examine the case of neoliberalism—the dominant socioeconomic approach from the late 1970s to the present, which advocates privatization, abolition of the welfare state, and curtailment of redistributive programs. Our longitudinal analysis, spanning two decades (1995-2019) and over 160 countries, suggests that neoliberal systems contribute to the production of equity-based distributive beliefs. We conclude that distributive beliefs are better understood as socially-constructed ideologies than as universal preferences; they represent an ideological constellation of norms, beliefs, and values shaped by institutional structures. Finally, we propose avenues for future research that consider micro- and macro-level analyses of distributive beliefs and of ideology more broadly.

Definitions

To make clear where our views do (and do not) diverge from those of other scholars, some definitions are necessary:

1. Philosophical and social-theoretic treatments of distributive justice (e.g., those of John Rawls, 2020, and Robert Nozick, 2007), involve *normative* arguments and attempts to determine which principles of resource allocation are justified or “correct.”
2. In the psychological study of distributive justice, *prescriptive* beliefs refer to those principles that laypeople regard as fair, socially appropriate, or moral. For instance, a person may believe that resources should be allocated according to recipients’ relative levels of merit; alternatively, they may prefer a society in which resources are allocated such that all recipients’ needs are equally met.
3. In contrast to prescriptive beliefs, *descriptive* distributive-justice beliefs represent appraisals of whether a particular allocation principle is being faithfully realized in practice. For example, two people who share the prescriptive belief in justice-as-equity may disagree as to whether society, as presently constituted, succeeds in dividing resources in an equitable manner.

The present work is concerned primarily with people’s *prescriptive* beliefs concerning resource allocation—that is, beliefs about how valued social goods should be distributed within society—and the psychological accounts of such beliefs about distributive justice. Thus, we do not address philosophical debates concerning distributive principles. Nor are we centrally concerned with people’s descriptive beliefs about distributive justice—although, as elaborated later, analyses of descriptive beliefs employ notions of ideological construction that we borrow to understand the formation of people’s prescriptive distributive-justice beliefs.

Alternative Principles of Distributive Justice

The concept of distributive justice has a long history in social and political thought. A constituent of social justice, distributive justice is concerned with the rules and principles that underlie political, economic, and social frameworks for allocating wealth, rewards, and costs within a society. Distributive justice has been defined as “a state of affairs (either actual or ideal) in which [...] benefits and burdens in society are dispersed in accordance with some allocation principle” (Jost & Kay, 2010, p. 1122).

In distributive systems based on the equity principle, the goal is to reach a proportionate ratio of merit to outcome for each individual. Based on the *equality/need* rule, in contrast, benefits and burdens should be shared based on the needs of the members with the goal of maximizing equality in outcome³ (Cook & Hegtvædt, 1983; Sampson, 1975). In

²By ideology, we are referring to a collection of institutions, practices, laws, policies, beliefs, norms, and values pertaining to how society is and ought to be structured, (re)produced through the interaction of “top-down” (structural or societal) factors and “bottom-up” psychological proclivities (Jost et al., 2009).

³In some formulations of distributive justice (e.g., Deutsch, 1975; Miller, 2001), need-based distributions are distinguished from equality-based distributions. However, in classic philosophical and social-theoretic treatments, need-based and equality-based systems often are not distinguished. In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875/2008), Karl Marx described the underlying principle of communism (often characterized as a system based on equality of outcomes) as “[...] from each according to their ability, to each according to their need” and as a system in which “[...] the proceeds of labor belong undiminished with equal right to all members of society.”

In her sociological analysis of fairness beliefs, Hochschild (1981) also categorizes the need and equality rules under the same justice principle, noting that need-based distributions can be characterized as “subjective equality,” in which the goal is not to reach strict equality of outcomes but rather to equally meet everyone’s material and psychological needs. In this paper, we treat equality and need as entailing the same justice rule; however, further empirical work is needed to support (or refute) the idea that the justice reasoning underlying need-based decisions are truly inseparable from equality-based decisions.

normative formulations of distributive justice, references to the two allocation principles of equity and equality can be found as far back as Aristotle's (384-322 B.C.E.) *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 2000), and these alternatives have been extensively critiqued in Marxian, liberal-progressive, and conservative formulations of justice (Jost & Kay, 2010).

Psychological Research into Distributive Justice: A Brief History

Psychologists, naturally, are interested less in philosophical considerations than in the allocation rules people actually employ in making distributive decisions and fairness appraisals. In assessing the importance of the equity principle and its alternatives to the psychological study of distributive justice beliefs, a brief chronological account of the relevant scholarship is useful.

Early Emphasis on Equity as the Basis of Prescriptive Justice

In social psychology, Equity Theory (ET; J. S. Adams, 1965; Blau, 2017; Frankena, 1966; Hatfield et al., 1978; Leventhal & Anderson, 1970) attained prominence in the 1960s and 70s. ET identifies equity-based reasoning as the foundation of most distributive judgments. Using an exchange-based framework (Homans, 1974), ET theorists view human relations as transactions in which people prefer a proportional ratio of inputs (e.g., effort, productivity, ability, time, talent, money) to outcomes (e.g., advantages, payment, income, wealth, social or material rewards). According to this model, equity is not just a principle for making distributive decisions, but is also what underlies most human interactions—even those that are non-economic in nature. For instance, close or romantic relationships with disproportionate input to outcome ratios tend to be frustrating, unsatisfying, and perceived as unfair (Boll et al., 2003; Van den Bos et al., 2006).

Despite its early predominance, ET immediately attracted critics. In particular, Morton Deutsch and Melvin Lerner—two pioneers in the study of the psychology of justice—criticized ET for limiting the conception of justice to equity. We will discuss their contributions in greater detail in later sections.

A Shift to the Study of Descriptive Justice

Since these early analyses of prescriptive equity, psychologists in the 1980s to the present have directed much of their attention to a different question: laypeople's descriptive beliefs concerning distributive justice (e.g., Hochschild, 1981; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Kluegel & Smith, 2017). This literature examines the sources and consequences of people's judgments of whether current societal arrangements meet the criteria for particular distributive principles (often equity).

Research into descriptive beliefs has yielded important insights. Conducted primarily in the context of the U.S. and the "American Dream," this work elucidates how people's widespread belief in social mobility and the equity of the system (Davidai & Gilovich, 2018; Hochschild, 1981; Kluegel & Smith, 2017) justifies social inequality by casting it as the result of differences in merit rather than inequalities of opportunity (Madeira et al., 2019; Major & Kaiser, 2017; McCoy & Major, 2007; Shariff et al., 2016). Believing that one's current system is fair serves emotional functions as well—"palliating" the otherwise aversive realization that one's society is shot through with injustice (Goudarzi et al., 2020; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Napier et al., 2020).

Importantly, while the social-scientific literature has until recently focused primarily on analyses of laypeople's descriptive beliefs, some researchers continued to examine the complexity of our prescriptive beliefs. (Hochschild, 1981), for instance, identifies limits on U.S. Americans' prescriptive preference for equity over equality, finding that they tend to endorse equity in socioeconomic matters but equality in the private and political spheres. Davey and colleagues (1999) regard "preference for the merit principle" (i.e., prescriptive equity) as an individual-difference dimension existing alongside the endorsement of alternative principles, such as need and equality. Rasinski (1987), too, distinguishes between equality and equity principles in his two-dimensional individual difference measure of prescriptive fairness beliefs.

Scholarship on descriptive equity casts distributive-fairness beliefs as the product of ideological processes (e.g., the influence of macro-level structures as well as the motivation to justify extant social systems)⁴. In this paper, we argue that such notions of ideological construction should be applied to questions of prescriptive equity as well. Inspired by the literature on descriptive equity, as well as early prescriptive treatments of distributive justice in psychology (such as that developed by Deutsch), we argue for a broader conception of fairness that emphasizes macro-structural and

⁴This is also true for the few exceptions mentioned above on prescriptive equity—namely, Rasinski (1987), Hochschild (1981), and Davey and colleagues (1999)

individual-level factors. In the next section, we review recent theoretical and empirical developments on prescriptive equity.

A Resurgence of Equity-Based Analyses of Prescriptive Justice

In line with the assumptions of ET, some psychologists have recently begun again to identify distributive justice with (prescriptive) equity, tending to ignore alternative justice principles. For instance, Moral Foundation Theory (MFT; Graham et al., 2013) recognizes fairness (also referred to as reciprocity by MFT theorists) as one of the five moral foundations and, like ET, conceives of fairness as proportional sharing in exchange relationships. Other fields—in particular, behavioral economics, comparative psychology, and evolutionary psychology—have encouraged a limited view of distributive justice as equity.

Behavioral Economics

Theories in behavioral economics have often characterized humans' desire for fairness as inequity aversion (e.g., Bolton & Ockenfels, 2000; Camerer, 2003; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Rabin, 1993). This approach offers a valuable rebuttal to classical models in economics, which view humans as strictly selfish. Analyzing people's behavior in experimental games meant to simulate real-world distributive decisions, researchers have concluded that resource-allocation preferences are not entirely self-interested—but often reflect a desire for equitable outcomes. Importantly, however, behavioral-economic games are typically structured such that equitable outcomes are also equal, as players typically do not differ in their inputs (e.g., Dawes et al., 2007). Thus, many of the findings that have fueled the emphasis on equity in behavioral economics could be interpreted as reflecting a desire for either equity *or* equality. Disambiguating these possibilities requires researchers to create situations in which the ideals of equity and equality lead to different distributions.

In practice, disambiguating equity and equality means creating situations in which players' endowments—the initial amounts they are given to keep or distribute—are not simply “manna from heaven” (Cappelen et al., 2007, p. 818). Instead, players must be provided with information about their own and others' inputs. Some work, for instance, has investigated the role of effort in driving people's resource allocations (e.g., Bland et al., 2017; Franco-Watkins et al., 2013; Muehlbacher & Kirchler, 2009). Franco-Watkins and colleagues (2013) showed that participants compensate those (including themselves) they perceive to have expended more effort more than those they perceive to have expended less effort. Similarly, Muehlbacher and Kirchler (2009) found that, if participants earn their endowments with greater apparent effort, they subsequently contribute fewer resources to the public good—presumably because they feel they deserve to retain more resources for themselves. These findings provide a strong case for the importance of equity in individuals' resource-allocation decisions. However, while equity is undoubtedly important to many participants in studies of this sort, it is still possible that players differ in their responsiveness to equity cues.

In a rare behavioral-economic attempt to document individual differences in fairness ideals, Cappelen and colleagues (2007) designed a dictator game in which the distribution phase (where players decide how much of their money to keep or give away) was preceded by a “production” phase. In the production phase, players were allowed to invest and earn returns on portions of their endowment. While participants could freely decide how much to invest, their subsequent rate of return was determined by luck. The researchers found that 18.4% of players exhibited “libertarianism,” choosing distributions in which all players receive exactly what they earned in the production phases. A larger percentage of players, 38.1%, exhibited “liberal egalitarianism,” preferring distributions in which all players retain the amount of their initial investment (over which they had control) irrespective of their rate of return (over which they were powerless). However, the largest group of participants, 43.5%, displayed “strict egalitarianism,” selecting *equal* distributions regardless of the results of the production phase. Thus, when behavioral-economic games are made to better resemble real-world conditions—in which people possess knowledge, or at least credible assumptions, about the sources of their and others' endowments—a plurality of fairness ideals come into view.

Evolutionary and Comparative Research

Similar to behavioral economists' equity-based view of fairness, evolutionary and comparative researchers have typically examined whether human and non-human primates protest inequity—defined as a relatively disproportionate ratio of rewards to task demands (e.g., Brosnan & de Waal, 2003, 2014; Fehr et al., 2008). Indeed, in their review of research on non-human primates, Bräuer and Hanus (2012) limit their definition of fairness to “an interest in the ideal of equity” and an evolved sense of inequity-aversion. Similarly, in their evolutionary account of the origins of fairness, Debove and colleagues (2017) portray equity as the core of human fairness evaluations. Although Brosnan (2013) suggests that both equality and equity are amenable, in principle, to study in non-human primates, she contends that interpretational challenges make it difficult to distinguish between these fairness ideals in animals.

Definitional issues aside, comparative studies bolster the case for an interest in equity among non-human primates. For instance, it appears that brown capuchin monkeys (Brosnan & de Waal, 2003) and long-tailed macaques (Massen et al., 2012) may take effort into consideration when judging the fairness of rewards, lending credence to the view that equity evolved as a means of fostering cooperation between conspecifics. Yet because the scope of fairness in the animal and evolutionary literature is largely limited to definitions and designs that privilege animals' (in)equity considerations (e.g., Proctor et al., 2013), it would be premature to conclude that our recent ancestors lacked concern for equality or need.

Interpersonal vs. Societal Distributions

Behavioral-economic, comparative, and evolutionary approaches to distributive justice typically share a problematic assumption: that justice reasoning carried out in interpersonal contexts involves the same psychological processes as those used to judge societal distributions. One notable difference between these contexts is that, when deciding which distributions are fair for society as a whole, people lack information about each individual's input—a critical detail usually known to players in economic games. Thus, the extent to which we can draw on behavioral economics, or comparative and evolutionary psychology, to understand distributive justice at the level of society is unclear. Even if interpersonal justice judgments are governed primarily by equity, it is possible that a greater diversity of principles may be found at the societal level.

Explicitly highlighting the distinction between fairness in interpersonal vs. societal contexts, Starmans and colleagues (2017) conclude that equity underlies fairness judgments and behaviors in both domains. These researchers argue that, to the extent that perceivers take merit to be distributed normally across society—with some individuals being more hard-working and able than others—equality of outcomes is seen as unfair. Conversely, to the degree people view merit as relatively invariant across individuals, an equal distribution of resources will be seen as just. In either case, justice judgments are rooted in perceptions of equity (merit). An implication of this perspective is that even equal distributions may have equity concerns at their root.

Although Starmans and colleagues (2017) note that “outside of the United States and Europe . . . there are wide differences in fairness concerns across world cultures” (p. 3) and briefly discuss the possibility that other factors (e.g., need) affect justice perceptions, they conclude that the preference for equitable (i.e., merit-based) outcomes at the societal level is predominant. Similarly, Trump (2020) argues that, within and across societies, people give primacy to equity as the normative rule underlying fair allocations. Thus, recent work treats equity, not as just one of multiple principles of distributive justice, but as the primary basis of human fairness appraisals at the interpersonal and societal levels.

The Diversity of Distributive Justice Beliefs

In light of the outsize influence of equity theory on psychologists' understanding of prescriptive justice, we believe the time is right to remind our colleagues that equity is just one of several rules that guide human beings' distributive decisions. To this end, we outline evidence that—far from being uniform or universal—justice appraisals are heterogeneous across relationships, developmental stages, cultures, and of particular interest in this article, socioeconomic structures.

Distributive Justice Across Relationship Types

Despite the resurgence of emphasis on prescriptive equity beliefs in recent years, older literature in social psychology suggests a diversity of distributive principles across relationship types and their accompanying associational goals. During the heyday of ET, Morton Deutsch (1975) warned that equity-based (as opposed to equality- or need-based) rules of distributive justice are most compatible with cooperative relationships in which the primary goal is economic productivity, rather than welfare or interpersonal harmony and solidarity. Likewise, Sampson (1975) criticizes ET for limiting justice reasoning to the equity principle, arguing for equality as an alternative historical and contemporary solution to the problem of just distributions. He suggests that people's interaction goals, either instrumental in wanting to maximize personal gains, or interpersonal in wanting to create harmonious relationships, are important in identifying which justice rule is applied. Sampson (1975) further proposes that the equality solution underlines cooperative aspects, whereas equity solutions stress competitive aspects, of relationships. Notably, Sampson (1975, 1983) does not consider equity in human relationships as a natural tendency, but rather as a consequence of political, ideological, and cultural factors—in particular, of Western capitalism. We return to this theme of ideological construction in the empirical portion of this article.

In developing his theory of justice motives, Lerner (1977) differentiates equity and parity (i.e. equality) as different forms of justice. He argues that the perceived relationship between the self and others predicts the particular form of justice that is applied in a given situation. In what he calls “unit” relations, the self and other are viewed as similar

and the justice of parity prevails. In “non-unit” relations, in which the self and other are viewed as different, the rule of equity is applicable (Lerner, 1974). In sum, for these early scholars, justice can take forms other than equity. It is noteworthy that the new wave of scholars who center prescriptive equity (e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Starmans et al., 2017) largely ignore the admonitions of early justice researchers against overextending the equity principle.

Alan Fiske (1992; 1991) finds that distributive justice, like other life domains, tends to be guided by four distinct relationship types, or what he calls “modes of sociality.” Only one of these modes—market pricing—resembles the equity principle. When a social relationship is structured according to market pricing, resources are shared according to each member’s contribution. Two other forms of sociality in Fiske’s formulation, communal sharing and equality matching, more closely follow the need-based and equality modes of distribution, respectively. In communal sharing, group members have the right to share in the resources according to need; in equality matching, resources are shared equally.

Similarly, Miller (2001) argues that different rules of justice must be understood in the context of different forms of human association. His scheme involves three principles of fairness. First, desert (i.e., equity) prevails when people engage in “instrumental association” (coordinated yet self-interested economic activity). Second, equality governs relationships defined by “citizenship” (shared legal and political bonds). Finally, the need principle is predominant for “solidaristic communities” defined by shared culture or beliefs. Although Miller’s theory is mostly normative (i.e., concerned with which justice principles are “correct”), he uses empirical data to demonstrate the central role played by these principles, and their corresponding associational forms, in lay conceptions of justice.

Together, these different lines of work suggest that the content of distributive justice is highly dependent upon interaction contexts and the values and goals they foster. In the following section, we review developmental and cross-cultural that the preference for equity-based allocations is a contingent product of socialization and acculturation processes.

Distributive Justice Across Development and Culture

The developmental literature encompasses the majority of psychological data on justice rules other than equity. Not surprisingly, most of this literature focuses on how understandings of merit and equity develop in children. Some work using visual preference paradigms suggests an early understanding of deservingness in infants as young as 20 months (Sloane et al., 2012; Surian & Franchin, 2017). However, the meaning of these findings is debated, with some advising against interpreting them as reflecting young children’s understanding of fairness (e.g., Dahl, 2014). The more robust finding is that, while younger children prefer more equal distributions, as they grow older their preference shifts to equity-based distributions (e.g., Almås et al., 2010; Schmidt et al., 2016; Sigelman & Waitzman, 1991; Smith & Warneken, 2016). Regardless of the age at which it occurs, this shift has been typically described in terms of children developing a more complex way of integrating relevant information into their moral reasoning (Kienbaum & Wilkening, 2009; Rizzo et al., 2016; Schmidt et al., 2016).

Importantly, there is also some conflicting evidence suggesting a preference for equality and need even among older children. Elenbaas (2019), for instance, showed U.S. American children peer-based scenarios involving different justice rules—including merit (equity) and equality. Children older than 5 and up to 8 years of age tended to judge scenarios consistent with the equality rule more favorably than scenarios consistent with the merit rule. In another study, U.S. American fifth-graders favored equality-based distribution as their first choice, even in scenarios where merit was salient (Carson & Banuazizi, 2008).

Other work suggests that, consistent with application of the equality/need rule, children take the need of the recipient into consideration when making fairness decisions (Essler et al., 2020; Malti et al., 2016). Rizzo and Killen (2016) presented children 3 to 8 years old with a vignette about two recipients, one with a lot of resources and another with few resources. Whereas younger children preferred a strictly equal distribution, older children gave more to the character who had fewer resources even though the two characters worked the same amount—suggesting an understanding of need and a desire to rectify inequality. Similarly, Kienbaum and Wilkening (2009) found that Swiss and German children between 6 to 9 years of age depended primarily on the need of the recipient when dividing candies to fictional characters. In this study, it was not until adolescence that they began to incorporate merit into their reasoning.

In a few studies, preferences for equity (vs. equality) among children have been shown to vary as a function of culture and economic structures. Although children from many different cultures take merit into account (Liénard et al., 2013; Zhang, 2020), children from collectivist (in contrast to individualist) cultures tend to prefer equality over the equity rule. In one study, for instance, Chinese children liked allocators who divided rewards based on the equality rule more than those who divided rewards based on equity rule and viewed equal allocations as fairer than equitable ones (Leung & Bond, 1984). More recently, Huppert and colleagues (2019) studied children aged 4 to 11 years from 13 countries playing a distributive game. Children were asked to distribute candy to a hypothetical recipient who varied in wealth (amount of candy resources), merit (effort on homework), or elicited empathy (had a broken leg). Children

from individualist societies favored equitable distributions, both when the recipient was high in merit, but also when the recipient was low in candy resources (i.e., high in need). For their part, children from collectivist cultures preferred more equal distributions regardless of the recipients' merit or candy resources. In another study, German children distributed outcomes of a joint enterprise according to their partners' merit, but children from a pastoralist society in Africa, where wealth and power are concentrated among the elders, did not consider merit at all in distributing outcomes (Schäfer et al., 2015). Children from an egalitarian hunter-gatherer society in Africa, in contrast to children from the other two societies, distributed the spoils more equally.

There are a number of issues that have not been adequately addressed in studies of equity in children. First, few studies have examined whether children bring different fairness principles to different resource types. However, in a rare study of its kind, Rizzo and colleagues (2016) found that 6- to 8-year-olds allocated resources they considered a necessity based on the need principle, but distributed resources they considered a luxury according to merit. Another issue when interpreting the developmental shift from equality- to equity-focused allocation concerns the reasoning underlying children's merit-based decisions. In particular, it is not clear whether children make such decisions based on social norms, feedback from their parents, or genuine moral concerns (Noh, 2020).

Complicating matters further, the contexts in which allocation decisions are made may influence children's preference for unequal distributions. Essler and colleagues (2020), for instance, found that children tended to reference patterns of preexisting inequality in order to justify distributing resources unequally to peers. Cues in the immediate environment, too, can modulate children's behavior in resource allocation tasks. Illustrating this, Ulber and colleagues (2015) demonstrated that 18- to 24-month old German dyads often divide resources equally and generously (i.e., unselfishly)—unless possession or ownership cues were made salient by the experimenters. Findings such as these imply that children's developing understanding of distributive justice is more complex than a simple equality-to-equity shift.

Developmental data suggest that cultural and economic factors influence people's reliance on different prescriptive distribution rules from an early age. Studies documenting cultural variation in children's distributive beliefs raise the possibility that equity is just one of multiple co-equal rules governing allocation decisions. More broadly, it seems that factors such as culture, economic organization, and the interaction structures they promote can account for considerable differences in distributive beliefs (Henrich et al., 2005; Hui et al., 1991; Konow et al., 2020). We therefore suggest that distributive preferences represent values, beliefs, and behaviors that are adaptive within a given sociocultural ecology (Kitayama & Cohen, 2007; Nisbett, 2004).

Social Institutions and the Construction of Equity Beliefs: The Case of Neoliberalism

We have argued that people's distributive justice preferences are diverse, varying across development, relationships, economic structures, and cultures. If this is correct, then what processes best explain this rich heterogeneity? Mechanisms based in evolutionary psychology frequently attribute people's social preferences to specific dilemmas faced by our Pleistocene ancestors (Tooby & Cosmides, 2005). Yet, while evolutionary theorizing can account for the existence of a universal *repertoire* of justice principles, it cannot easily explain how people in different social milieus come to grant primacy to different principles. Thus, a full account of heterogeneity in people's distributive justice preferences must include learning and acculturative components.

Here we reaffirm psychology's old tradition of viewing justice preferences as ideologies corresponding to particular social goals and motivations. We argue that distributive beliefs reflect, in part, the social structures in which individuals are embedded and the ideologies that those structures communicate. We posit that the beliefs, values, and moral goals of a society are reflected in the social structures that shape the values and morals of its individual members. Hinting at this conclusion, Meindl and colleagues (2019) found that the societal goal of economic power (as opposed to wellbeing of citizens) predicted equity-based (in contrast to equality-based) distributive beliefs. We therefore propose that distributive beliefs should be examined in the context of macro-level socioeconomic systems, which collectively form the dominant ideology of an epoch.

The Global Rise of Neoliberalism

Since the late 1970s, neoliberalism has been the hegemonic economic and social system globally (Crouch, 2020; Harvey, 2007). Neoliberalism typically supports reductions in government spending, privatization of industries, and deregulation to stimulate public consumption and economic growth. Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister from 1975 to 1990, undertook massive privatization of previously-public industries (e.g., steel, electricity, gas, oil, coal, and water) and companies (e.g., British Airways and British Telecom)—with the motto “There is no alternative [to free-market capitalism].” During the same period, U.S. President Ronald Reagan instituted “Reaganomics,” which greatly decreased government social spending and federal regulation of industry through laws such as the Economic

Recovery Tax Act of 1981 and the Reform Act of 1986. In China, after the death of communist Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976, Deng Xiaoping enacted the Chinese version of neoliberalization through a program of economic reform, which included de-collectivization of agriculture and the opening of the country's markets to foreign investment. Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, after his military takeover in 1973, experimented with neoliberalism by deregulating capital flow, reducing taxes, and suppressing labor unions. International financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank adopted neoliberal policies in the early 1980s and played a large role in spreading them globally—especially in the Global South through Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs).

Neoliberalism's manifestations have varied from country to country, and each case has its own peculiarities. Nevertheless, neoliberalism as an economic structure reaches beyond historically free-market economies in the Western hemisphere and has transformed many societies around the world—including traditional social democracies such as Sweden and ostensibly anticapitalist states such as China (Harvey, 2007; Saad Filho & Johnston, 2004). Moreover, neoliberalism has not only permeated national and international discourse, policies, and institutions, but is also reflected in values and beliefs about individual effort, merit, and deservingness (G. Adams et al., 2019; Brown, 2019). Thatcher herself admitted this transformation when she proclaimed, "Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul." Our empirical goal in the present paper is to document the impact of neoliberal economic "methods" on individuals' "souls"—that is, people's conceptions of fairness and distributive justice. Doing so promises both to illuminate the psychological effects of the global economic order and make an affirmative case that individuals' distributive preferences are actively constructed through social and economic structures.

Meritocracy, Neoliberalism, and the Ideological Basis of Equity Beliefs

The psychological dimensions of neoliberalism—in particular, the individual beliefs and values that reflect and sustain it—have recently become a focus of psychological study (Bettache & Chiu, 2019). At the center of neoliberal subjectivity are descriptive and prescriptive equity (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Beattie et al., 2019; Grzanka et al., 2020). Adams and colleagues (2019) argue that, among other psychological effects, neoliberalism enforces an "individualist-entrepreneurial" understanding of the self. Individualist-entrepreneurial selfways abstract the person from the restraints of context and view the self as autonomous from its social and material surroundings. As Thatcher once declared, "They [people in economic need] are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women."

When applied to the economic domain, neoliberalism's individualist-entrepreneurial selfways naturally foster prescriptive meritocracy. By casting individuals as free agents whose successes and failures reflect their own choices, neoliberalism encourages the belief that societal benefits and burdens ought to be allocated in proportion to individuals' contributions to the collective. Yet this formulation does not by itself establish proportionality as a moral principle; indeed, other considerations, such as economic efficiency and growth, might justify calibrating individuals' outcomes to their "inputs." However, as Michael Sandel (2020) notes in his critique of meritocracy, proponents of neoliberalization—from Reagan to Thatcher to Bill Clinton—have always tied neoliberalism's mandate of proportional rewards to moralized notions of deservingness. For such leaders, neoliberalism's promise of proportionality ensures that people "get what they deserve and deserve what they get." At a more fundamental level, Fourcade and Healy (2007) argue that economic principles, when promulgated to society as a whole, represent "moralized projects" that inevitably mold laypeople's understanding of what is and is not fair. Thus, neoliberalism (at least in its Western incarnations) is inextricably linked to prescriptive equity—the notion that deviations from the proportional allocation of burden and benefits are unjust.

Has Neoliberalism Shaped Distributive Beliefs? An Empirical Investigation

Psychological theorizing suggests an intimate connection between neoliberal systems and individuals' distributive justice beliefs. On this view, equity beliefs are ideological products arising from exposure to decentralized and deregulated economic structures (and their associated moral rhetorics; Sandel, 2020) that idealize individuals as free agents who ought to incur proportional rewards and burdens. Our empirical goal was to test this process of ideological construction. To this end, we investigated the relationship between neoliberal economic structures and prescriptive distributive justice beliefs—in particular, preference for equal vs. merit-based income distributions—in more than 160 countries over the past two decades.

Datasets and Variables

Neoliberal policies were measured using the Fraser Institute's 42-item "Economic Freedom Index" (EFI). The Fraser Institute is a conservative think tank that began creating this index in 2000, and since then has provided a yearly score for over 160 countries. (For the 1970-1999 period, the Fraser Institute compiled retrospective EFI scores

in five-year increments.) The most recent publicly available dataset contains EFI scores as late as 2019 (<https://www.fraserinstitute.org/studies/economic-freedom>). The Fraser Institute items fall into five groups, labeled “Size of government,” “Legal structure and property rights,” “Sound money,” “Freedom to trade internationally,” “Regulation of business, credit, and labor,” and the institute provides an average for each group as well as an aggregate measure (labeled EFI).

A psychometric study of the 42 items of EFI has identified a four-factor structure (DePhillips, 2015). According to DePhillips (2015), three of the factors, representing economic development, trade openness, and monetary stability, tap into traditional liberalism. The fourth factor captures neoliberalism. Items that load on this factor include the following: government consumption, transfers and subsidies, top marginal income tax, income and payroll tax, hiring and firing regulation, centralized collective bargaining, hours regulation, and administrative requirements. Higher scores on this index indicate higher levels of neoliberalism.

Our measure of distributive justice came from the World Values Survey (WVS; Inglehart et al., 2014). Our analysis was conducted on five waves of data, from WVS wave 3 (1995-1998) through 7 (2017-2019). The following item was used to gauge distributive fairness preferences: “How would you place your views on this scale? 1 means you agree completely with the statement on the left; 10 means you agree completely with the statement on the right; and if your views fall somewhere in between, you can choose any number in between.” On the left, the statement “Incomes should be made more equal” appeared, and on the right the statement “We need larger income differences as incentives for individual effort” appeared. Therefore, higher numbers indicated preference for merit-based (vs. equal) income distributions (1981-2019 time-series WVS dataset can be found at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>).

We also included two time-varying covariates, the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Gini index, to adjust for vast differences in economic “development” and inequality, respectively, across different countries. The HDI covers the three dimensions of life expectancy, educational attainment, and gross national income (GNI) per capita, and the scores for the three areas are averaged into a composite index, with higher numbers indicating higher scores on these three dimensions. The Gini index measures the extent to which the distribution of income in a society differs from a perfectly equal distribution. This index was obtained from the World Bank website (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>).

In a secondary analysis, we included a WVS indicator of individualism-collectivism used in previous research (Santos et al., 2017)—specifically, the percentage of respondents in a country who said it was important to teach children the value of independence. In the WVS, respondents are given a list of qualities “that children can be encouraged to learn at home” and are asked to indicate up to five qualities that they consider to be especially important to teach to children. Among the listed qualities is “independence.” The responses are dichotomized for each quality, (1= important, 0 = not mentioned). Following Santos et al. (2017), we calculated the percentage of people who mentioned “independence” in each country and in each wave to create our index of individualism.

Primary Analysis

To merge the EFI and WVS datasets, we first averaged our index of neoliberalism (the neoliberalism subfactor of the EFI) across the years which contained each WVS wave. Therefore, our final dataset contained five measurement occasions (wave 1: years 1995 through 1998, wave 2: years 1999 through 2004, wave 3: years 2005 through 2009, wave 4: years 2010 through 2014, wave 5: years 2017 through 2019)⁵ for neoliberalism and distributive justice beliefs. We used bivariate Dynamic Structural Equation Modeling (DSEM; Asparouhov et al., 2018; McNeish & Hamaker, 2020) to estimate parameters in Mplus 8.5 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). In DSEM, data is decomposed into time-variant (within-cluster) and time-invariant (between-cluster) components. The time-invariant component represents the stable means (or fixed effect in the multilevel framework), while the time-varying component models deviations from these means (or random effects in the multilevel framework). DSEM uses a Bayesian algorithm and estimates parameters using a Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) procedure. We used the *fbiter* option in Mplus to set the number of iterations to 10,000. With this option, the posterior distribution is based on the last half of the iterations (the last 5,000 in our model).

We monitored convergence by tracking the potential scale reduction factor (PSRF; Brooks & Gelman, 1998) and examining trace and autocorrelation plots of the parameter estimates (Asparouhov et al., 2018; McNeish & Hamaker, 2020). In order to obtain relatively independent draws from the posterior distribution of the parameters, we specified the *thin* option to request that only every tenth iteration of the parameter be kept. We used the default “diffuse” priors in Mplus indicating that the results are driven only by the data with no prior assumptions. Finally, we used the *tinterval* option to account for the uneven spacing of the observations.

⁵Including all 7 waves of the WVS does not change our conclusions. However, given the small sample size of the first 2 WVS waves, we sought to obtain more stable parameter estimates by including only the last 5 waves in our analyses.

In Model 1, neoliberalism and individuals' distributive beliefs for country i at time t are predicted from neoliberalism and beliefs at the preceding measurement occasion ($t-1$). Both neoliberal policies and distributive beliefs are latently centered around the country mean. We also included time-varying HDI and Gini in the model; therefore, neoliberalism and individuals' distributive beliefs for country i at time t are predicted from neoliberalism and beliefs at the preceding measurement occasion ($t-1$) adjusting for HDI and Gini at time t . (For the annotated Mplus code for Model 1, see Appendix A or the study's OSF page.) The Model 1 equations are

Within-country Equations

$$\text{Equity}_{ti} = \alpha_{1i} + \phi_{1i}\text{Equity}_{(t-1)i} + \phi_{4i}\text{Neolib}_{(t-1)i} + \beta_{1i}\text{Gini}_{ti} + \beta_{2i}\text{HDI}_{ti} + e_{1ti}$$

$$\text{Neolib}_{ti} = \alpha_{2i} + \phi_{2i}\text{Neolib}_{(t-1)i} + \phi_{3i}\text{Equity}_{(t-1)i} + e_{2ti}$$

Between-country Equations

$$\alpha_{1i} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0i}$$

$$\alpha_{2i} = \gamma_{10} + u_{1i}$$

$$\phi_{1i} = \gamma_{20} + u_{2i}$$

$$\phi_{2i} = \gamma_{30} + u_{3i}$$

$$\phi_{3i} = \gamma_{40} + u_{4i}$$

$$\phi_{4i} = \gamma_{50} + u_{5i}$$

$$\beta_{1i} = \gamma_{60} + u_{6i}$$

$$\beta_{2i} = \gamma_{70} + u_{7i}$$

In this model, the country-specific residual variances for each outcome are

$$\sigma_{1i}^2 = \exp(\omega_0 + u_{8i})$$

$$\sigma_{2i}^2 = \exp(\omega_1 + u_{9i})$$

$$\text{where } e_{1ti} \sim N(0, \sigma_{1i}^2) \text{ and } e_{2ti} \sim N(0, \sigma_{2i}^2)$$

The latent covariance of residual variances, σ_{1i2}^2 and σ_{2i2}^2 was specified to be positive, and its mean (fixed part) and variance (random part) are denoted by η and ρ , respectively, in Table 1. Except for the positive covariance between the residual variances, all other latent random variables were specified to have zero correlation with one another. Within- and between-country models are depicted in Figures 1A and 1B, respectively.

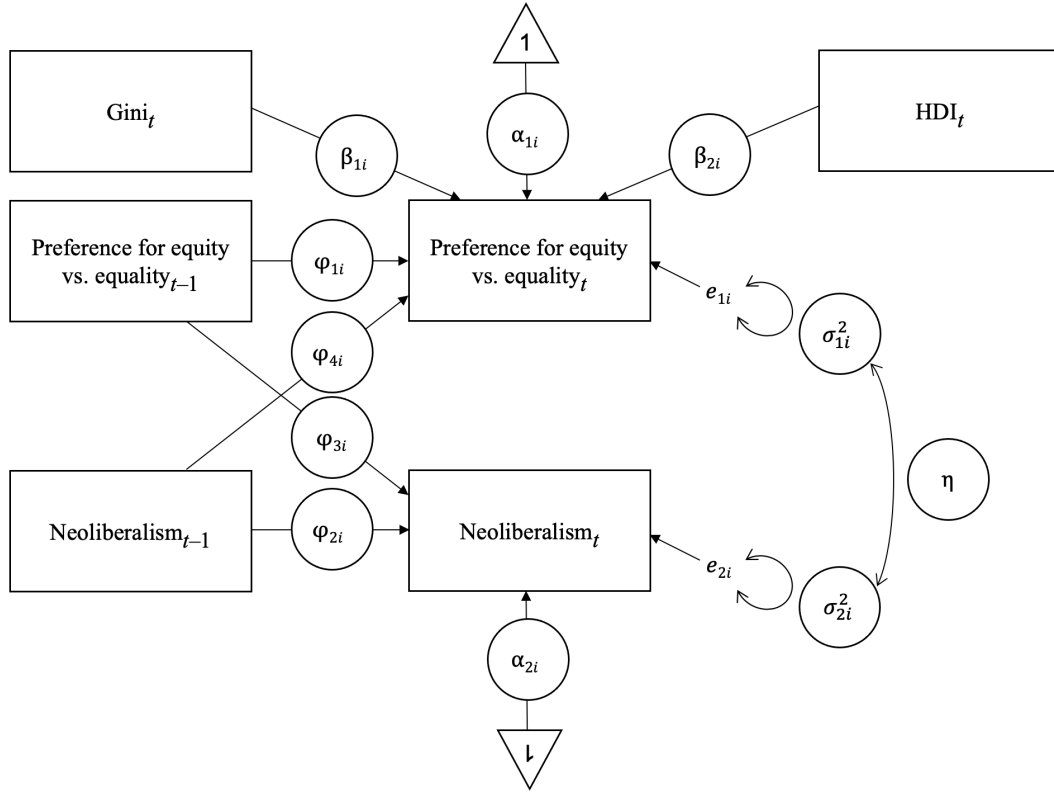
Primary Results

Full results for the analysis are shown in Table 1. See Figure 2 for a depiction of standardized estimates and 95% credible intervals (CIs) for the primary coefficients of interest (i.e., the cross-lagged and autoregressive effects).

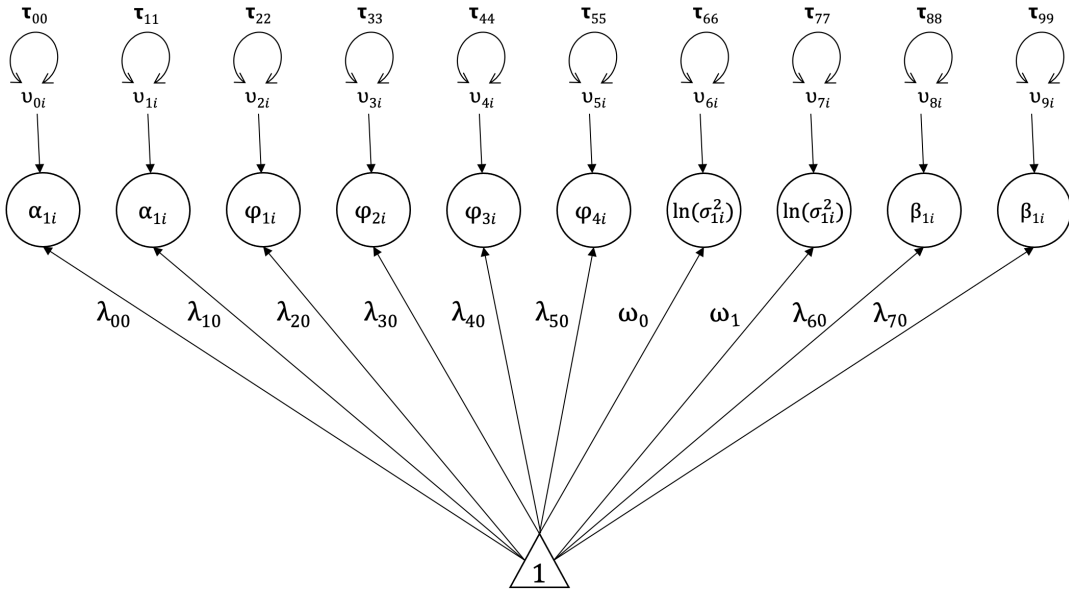
Convergence Trace plots and autocorrelation plots of the main parameters of interest from Model 1 are included in Appendix B. Inspection of these plots confirmed that the model successfully converged. Of the 28 estimated parameters, 22 parameters had a PSR equal to 1.01.

Autoregressive (Lagged) Effects Lag-1 equity preferences do not predict preferences at time t (ϕ_{1i}), Lag-1 neoliberalism positively predicts neoliberalism at time t (ϕ_{2i}), adjusting for HDI and Gini. The CI around the mean of ϕ_{1i} excludes zero, but the CI for the mean of ϕ_{2i} contains zero.

Crossed-Lagged Effects Lag-1 neoliberalism predicts higher equity preferences at time t (ϕ_{4i}), whereas Lag-1 beliefs do not predict neoliberalism at time t (ϕ_{3i}), adjusting for the time-varying effects of HDI and Gini. The CI around the mean of ϕ_{4i} excludes zero, whereas the CI around the mean ϕ_{3i} contains zero.



(a) Within-country Model



(b) Between-country Model

Figure 1: Primary Model

Table 1: Estimates and 95% Credible Intervals (CIs) for Primary Model

	Fixed Effects (Means)			Random Effects (Variances)		
	Notation	Estimate	95% CI	Notation	Estimate	95% CI
<i>Intercepts</i>						
α_1 : Equity _t	γ_{00}	5.94	[5.74, 6.15]	τ_{00}	.36	[.06, .66]
α_2 : Neoliberalism _t	γ_{10}	6.72	[6.46, 6.95]	τ_{11}	.15	[0.01, .52]
<i>Autoregressive effects</i>						
ϕ_1 : Equity _{t-1} → Equity _t	γ_{20}	-.028	[-.29, .26]	τ_{22}	.07	[.01, .20]
ϕ_2 : Neoliberalism _{t-1} → Neoliberalism _t	γ_{30}	.81	[.75, .87]	τ_{33}	.01	[.003, .03]
<i>Cross-lagged Effects</i>						
ϕ_3 : Equity _{t-1} → Neoliberalism _t	γ_{40}	-.06	[-.17, .06]	τ_{44}	.04	[.003, .13]
ϕ_4 : Neoliberalism _{t-1} → Equity _t	γ_{50}	.24	[.11, .40]	τ_{55}	.02	[.002, .10]
<i>Concurrent Effects</i>						
β_1 : Gini _{t-1} → Equity _t	γ_{60}	.03	[-.03, .09]	τ_{66}	.004	[.001, .02]
β_2 : HDI _{t-1} → Equity _t	γ_{70}	-2.75	[-6.19, .92]	τ_{77}	31.12	[1.37, 108.89]
<i>Log Residuals</i>						
Equity _t log residual variance	ω_0	-.88	[-1.58, -.40]	τ_{88}	.45	[.06, 1.64]
Neoliberalism _t log residual variance	ω_1	-2.90	[-3.83, -2.19]	τ_{99}	1.22	[.19, 2.35]
Covariance of residual variances	η	-1.65	[-2.17, -1.24]	ρ	.24	[.01, .86]

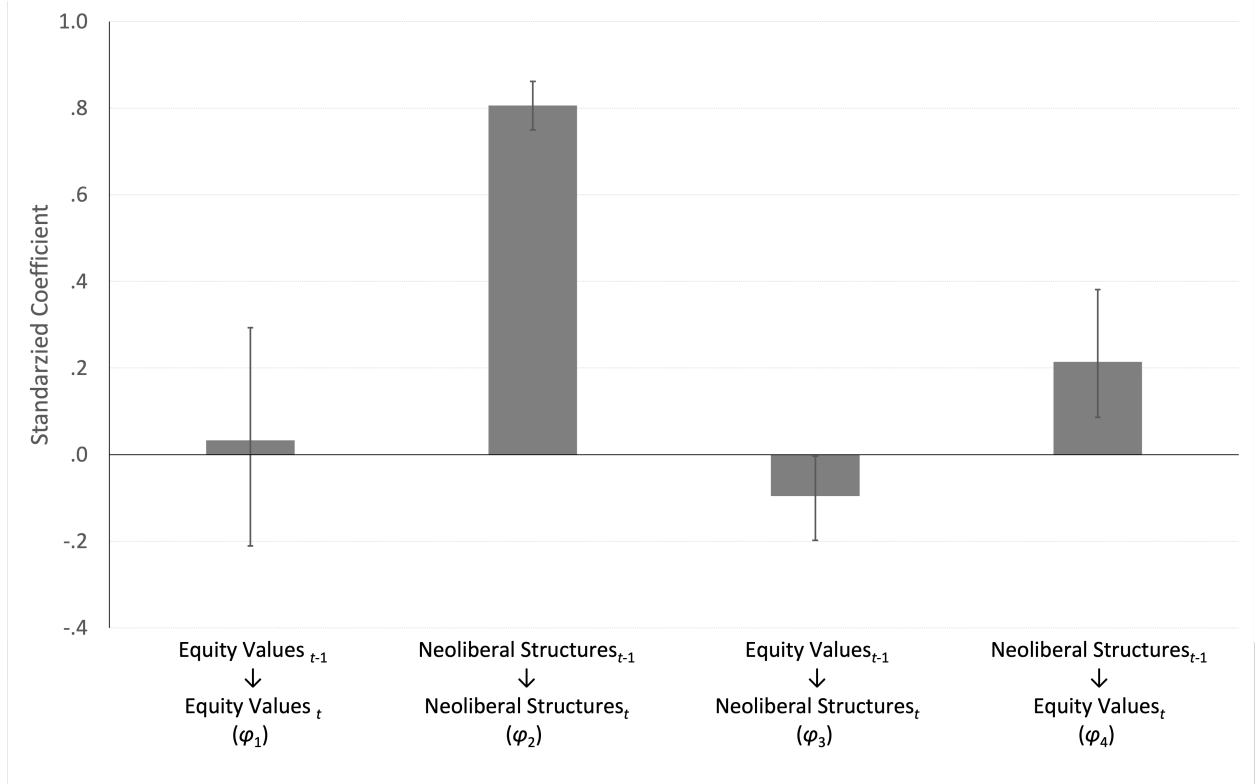


Figure 2: Standardized Coefficients for Autoregressive and Cross-lagged effects in the Primary Model

Secondary Analysis

Next, we examined whether individualism is, as theorized in previous literature (e.g., G. Adams et al., 2019), related to the effects we estimated. We ran an additional model, including our indicator of individualism as a time-invariant covariate in the model (Model 2). Including the time-invariant effect of individualism allowed us to investigate whether the cross-lagged effect of neoliberalism on equity beliefs (ϕ_{4i}) could be predicted by the fixed (grand-mean centered) effect of individualism (effect denoted by γ_{51}). The Model 2 equations are:

Within-country Equations

$$\text{Equity}_{ti} = \alpha_{1i} + \phi_{1i}\text{Equity}_{(t-1)i} + \phi_{4i}\text{Neolib}_{(t-1)i} + e_{1ti}$$

$$\text{Neolib}_{ti} = \alpha_{2i} + \phi_{2i}\text{Neolib}_{(t-1)i} + \phi_{3i}\text{Equity}_{(t-1)i} + e_{2ti}$$

Between-country Equations

$$\alpha_{1i} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}\text{Individualism}_c + u_{0i}$$

$$\alpha_{2i} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}\text{Individualism}_c + u_{1i}$$

$$\phi_{1i} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}\text{Individualism}_c + u_{2i}$$

$$\phi_{2i} = \gamma_{30} + \gamma_{31}\text{Individualism}_c + u_{3i}$$

$$\phi_{3i} = \gamma_{40} + \gamma_{41}\text{Individualism}_c + u_{4i}$$

$$\phi_{4i} = \gamma_{50} + \gamma_{51}\text{Individualism}_c + u_{5i}$$

In this model, the country-specific residual variances for each outcome are

$$\sigma_{1i}^2 = \exp(\omega_0 + \omega_2 + u_{6i})$$

$$\sigma_{2i}^2 = \exp(\omega_1 + \omega_3 + u_{7i})$$

$$\text{where } e_{1ti} \sim N(0, \sigma_{1i}^2) \text{ and } e_{2ti} \sim N(0, \sigma_{2i}^2)$$

The subscript c for individualism specifies that the between-country individualism is grand-mean centered. The latent covariance between residual variances σ_{1i2} and σ_{2i2} was specified to be positive, and its mean (fixed part) and variance (random part) is denoted by η and ρ , respectively, in Table 2. As in the previous model, aside from the positive covariance between the residual variances, all other latent random variables were specified to have zero correlation with each other.

Secondary Results

See Table 2 for full model results.

Convergence In Model 2, using the percentage of people within a country who reported “independence” to be an important quality to teach children as the measure of individualism, six parameters had a PSR equal to 1.083. The autocorrelation and trace plots of the main parameters of interest (mean and variance of ϕ_4) suggested satisfactory convergence (See Appendix B).

Autoregressive (Lagged) Effects Lag-1 distributive preferences do not affect preferences at time t (0 is inside the CI for the mean of ϕ_{1i}). However, Lag-1 neoliberalism positively predicts neoliberalism at time t (0 falls outside of the CI for the mean of ϕ_{2i}).

Cross-Lagged Effects As in Model 1, Lag-1 neoliberalism in Model 2 predicts higher equity-based distributive preferences at time t (ϕ_{4i}), whereas Lag-1 equity preferences do not predict neoliberalism at time t (ϕ_{3i}).

Table 2: Estimates and 95% Credible Intervals (CIs) for Secondary Model

	Fixed Effects (Means)			Random Effects (Variances)		
	Notation	Estimate	95% CI	Notation	Estimate	95% CI
<i>Intercepts</i>						
α_1 : Equity _t	γ_{00}	5.93	[5.73, 6.14]	τ_{00}	.25	[.05, .57]
α_2 : Neoliberalism _t	γ_{10}	6.67	[6.39, 6.93]	τ_{11}	.19	[.02, .58]
<i>Autoregressive effects</i>						
ϕ_1 : Equity _{t-1} → Equity _t	γ_{20}	.11	[-.18, .36]	τ_{22}	.06	[.001, .19]
ϕ_2 : Neoliberalism _{t-1} → Neoliberalism _t	γ_{30}	.81	[.75, .86]	τ_{33}	.01	[.001, .02]
<i>Cross-lagged Effects</i>						
ϕ_3 : Equity _{t-1} → Neoliberalism _t	γ_{40}	-.07	[-.18, .04]	τ_{44}	.03	[.002, .12]
ϕ_4 : Neoliberalism _{t-1} → Equity _t	γ_{50}	.18	[.06, .33]	τ_{55}	.02	[.001, .09]
<i>Mean Individualism Effects</i>						
Individualism _c → ϕ_1	γ_{21}	.02	[-.13, .15]			
Individualism _c → ϕ_2	γ_{31}	-.05	[-.08, -.01]			
Individualism _c → ϕ_3	γ_{41}	-.02	[-.09, .05]			
Individualism _c → ϕ_4	γ_{51}	-.05	[-.13, .03]			
Individualism _c → Equity _t	γ_{01}	.03	[-.12, .18]			
Individualism _c → Neoliberalism _t	γ_{11}	.04	[-.20, .29]			
Individualism _c → Equity _t log res var	ω_2	.11	[-.09, .33]			
Individualism _c → Neoliberalism _t log res var	ω_3	.30	[-.21, .69]			
<i>Log Residuals</i>						
Equity _t log residual variance	ω_0	-.53	[-.96, -.14]	τ_{66}	.32	[.03, 1.06]
Neoliberalism _t log residual variance	ω_1	-2.89	[-4.51, -2.12]	τ_{77}	.97	[.07, 2.21]
Covariance of residual variances	η	-1.56	[-2.06, -1.16]	ρ	.25	[.01, .73]

Time-invariant Effects of Individualism The time-invariant effects of individualism on the fixed and random effect of interest (ϕ_{4i}) were not different from zero. Individualism did, however, predict the autoregressive effect of neoliberalism (ϕ_{2i}), such that the higher a country’s level of individualism, the weaker the relationship between neoliberalism at successive timepoints. No other effects of individualism emerged.

Discussion

To summarize our findings, data from more than 160 countries collected in the past two decades suggest that neoliberal systems have been instrumental in promoting equity-based distributive beliefs, shifting the emphasis from the equality principle to the merit principle.

An important issue when using dynamic longitudinal models is whether the time interval used in the analysis is appropriate to model the theorized processes (Voelkle et al., 2018). Here, our five measurement occasions were 1995–1998 (wave 1), 1999–2004 (wave 2), 2005–2009 (wave 3), 2010–2014 (wave 4), and 2017–2019 (wave 5). Since WVS measurement continues for five years and not every country is measured at the same time, we can only speak of the average number of years between measurement occasions, which is roughly four years. Thus, our analysis assumes that a period of approximately four years is long enough for neoliberal policies and institutions to influence justice beliefs within societies (and conversely, for equity beliefs to shape neoliberal systems). Our results, in which higher than average (within-country) levels of neoliberalism tend to be followed by higher than average (within-country) levels of belief in equity, suggest that four years is sufficient to for—as Thatcher put it—systems to change “souls.” Conversely, the fact we did not find an effect of equity beliefs on neoliberal policies may suggest that four years is not long enough for “souls” to change systems.

At a broad level, our analysis suggests that equity beliefs, and distributive justice more broadly, should be understood with respect to the socioeconomic context and the ideological hegemony of the era within which they are studied, and not merely by resorting to universalistic notions of distributive justice.

Conclusions

In this article, we reviewed psychological literature from social, developmental, and cultural psychology to argue that, contrary to prevailing conceptions of distributive justice, the preference for equity is neither universal nor homogeneous. Specifically, we amplify the proposition of our discipline's pioneers that the equity principle is only one of the justice rules people apply in making distributive judgments. We further argue that distributive justice beliefs are ideological formations, shaped in the context of corresponding social, economic, and political structures and institutions. We support this argument by analyzing data from over 160 countries and across 24 years to demonstrate that neoliberalism has played a key role in shifting distributive justice beliefs from a preference for equality to a preference for merit.

The extant literature in psychology conceptualizes neoliberalism as a belief system that can vary dispositionally and situationally (Beattie et al., 2019; Bettache & Chiu, 2019). Bay-Cheng and colleagues (2015) developed a Neoliberal Beliefs Inventory (NBI), which taps four sub-facets of neoliberal thinking: System Inequality, conceptualized as views about the existence and the extent of inequality in society; Competition, measuring the extent to which one views competition as natural and beneficial; Personal Wherewithal, defined as attributing outcomes and success to personal dispositions such as hard work and merit; and Government Interference, gauging the extent to which state intervention is seen to constrain personal freedom and endanger the meritocratic ideal. In another attempt, Grzanka and colleagues (2020) created the single-facet Anti-Neoliberal Attitudes Scale (ANAS) scale using items from existing inventories. Moreover, the endorsement of neoliberal policies has been shown to predict other orientations and belief systems that legitimize group and system inequalities (Azevedo et al., 2019). Hartwich and Becker (2021) examined the situational effect of neoliberal beliefs, finding that exposure to neoliberal messages that prioritize freedom over justice and equality, individual success over public spirit, and distributions according to ability over need, induced anti-elite sentiment and that this was mediated by feelings of threat, unfairness, and hopelessness.

While the research described above is informative, from a cultural-psychological perspective the notion of ideology also includes laws, policies, institutions and practices embodying prescriptive and descriptive ideas about fair socioeconomic arrangements. Therefore, a sociocultural model of neoliberal ideology entails empirically investigating the dynamics of neoliberal belief systems (at an individual level) with neoliberal laws, institutions, and cultural practices and products as in the present analysis. To our knowledge, the empirical analysis presented in this paper is the first illustration within psychology and related fields of how neoliberal macro-structures influence distributive preferences and beliefs.

The question of the relationship between economic structures on the one hand and ideas, values, and culture on the other is longstanding. From Adam Smith to Karl Marx to contemporary sociologists and economists, whether and how market societies give rise to a certain ethos has been contentiously debated. Following Hirschman (1982), Fourcade and Healy (2007) typologize the sociological and economic scholarship on the relationship between markets and values into three main streams: the first tradition belongs to classical theorists who viewed markets as a “civilizing” force enabling cooperation and creativity in otherwise selfish individuals (such as Adam Smith and Milton Friedman). The second tradition belongs to those who, according to Fourcade and Healy (2007), view markets as a “commodified nightmare,” which largely includes Marxian work on alienation and exploitation under capitalist relations of production. What these two views have in common is that capitalism (or economic systems more broadly) is ultimately a powerful factor shaping morality and justice.

Contemporary models in economic sociology belong to a third tradition, what Fourcade and Healy (2007) describe as the “feeble markets” thesis, which provides a more nuanced narrative. In this view, the causal relationship between markets and moral values is not straightforward, and cultural and institutional legacies are important in shaping this relationship. In his classic work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber (1905/2013) famously argued that religion—specifically, the Protestant work ethic—was especially amenable to the development and maintenance of capitalism in Western societies. Contemporary economists and economic sociologists argue for an even more complex picture with some emphasizing the role of local context in modulating the relationship between markets and culture, and others for universal state interventions to foster market society despite cultural differences.

Fourcade and Healy (2007), for their part, advocate a view of markets as “moralized projects” that enable the “making” of moral persons. On this view, wage differences in market economies do not merely reflect payments and incentives for technological division of labor, but also signify individual status, merit, and worth according to the cultural narrative of capitalism. Zaki and colleagues (2021) coined *market cognition* to refer to a set of judgments and behaviors that are activated in the context of market societies. They argue that while markets can encourage prosociality in exchange relationships, they also promote the notion of humans as mainly motivated by self-interest. As mentioned earlier,

some scholars have referred to this “ultraindividualist” selfway as the entrepreneurial self or *homo economicus*, which personifies the ideas of Protestant work ethic and having the freedom to flourish (or perish) according to one’s merits (G. Adams et al., 2019; Bhatia & Priya, 2018).

The shift toward entrepreneurial identities, shaped by global neoliberal market forces, cuts across cultures. For instance, in an ethnographic study in Barbados, Freeman (2015) demonstrates that economic policy alterations aligned with neoliberalism have transformed cultural values and individual identities, especially among the middle class, to align more closely with the global economic status quo. She emphasizes the notion of “the self entrepreneurial project inextricable from enterprise and market sphere” (Freeman, 2015, p.3). Ethnographic research has also shown that neoliberal ideology shapes identity formation among Indian youth—shifting the emphasis toward productivity, competition, and personal achievement (Bhatia, 2017; Bhatia & Priya, 2018). Our empirical investigation also bolsters the argument that dominant economic ideologies shape psychological outcomes, such as distributive justice beliefs across cultures. This further illuminates the notion that equity-based distributive justice beliefs are not necessarily innate or universal. Rather, the pervasiveness of equity beliefs could be explained by the dominance of macro-level economic structures that promote market-congruent values, beliefs, and attitudes (Ratner, 2019).

Despite the evidence presented illustrating a shift toward equity-based evaluations shaped by global neoliberal economic paradigms, our review still captures nuances in distributive justice beliefs across development, relationships, economies, and cultures. This suggests that, in line with contemporary approaches in sociology, the influence of global ideology and market systems on distributive justice beliefs is modulated by other cultural and psychological factors. Further, although we do not observe this empirically in our analysis, we believe that the relationship between socio-historical structures and human psychology is a reciprocal one, with the two levels of analysis reinforcing one another. In the present case, meritocracy as a descriptive belief and an equity-based distributive rule has been identified as the main contributor to the success of neoliberalism (Littler, 2017), especially in Protestant societies. In turn, neoliberalism undermines solidarity and redistribution by promoting competitive individualism and the narrative of meritocracy (Peck et al., 2018).

As psychological researchers, we should not disregard the manifestation of other justice principles present in counter-hegemonic social movements and collectives (Worth, 2018) despite the massive influence of neoliberalism. In line with decolonial approaches in psychology, one goal of this paper has been to critically examine the role of certain psychological literatures on propagating a rather ahistorical and arguably Eurocentric notion of equity-as-fairness, and to highlight research that counters such conceptualizations of justice. In investigating the political and economic circumstances for the development of neoliberalism, Dardot and Laval (2014) observe that this discourse has not only proliferated the public sphere, but has also permeated domains of expertise, such as the government and the academy. Similarly, Adams and colleagues (2019) aim to elucidate the psychology of neoliberalism, while at the same time criticizing the neoliberalism of psychological sciences and advocating for its “decolonization.” We suggest that future work pay attention to the other principles of justice—namely, need and equality—as they are manifested in anticolonial and local struggles against globalization, Western domination, and other forms of oppression—such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas or Kurds in Rojava. Further, psychological treatments of distributive justice should consider the influence of structural and ideological factors in shaping perceptions of fairness. We conclude by asserting that psychological sciences would benefit from the integrative approach of distributive beliefs—attending to macro- as well as micro-level factors.

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