



Adolescents thinking on economic inequality: Expanding the discussion beyond the Global North[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Developmental psychologists have become increasingly interested in adolescents' thinking on economic inequality. Not surprisingly, most of this research has been conducted with samples from the United States, a paradigmatic example of a Global North region. It is therefore a potentially restrictive approach, given the diversity of manifestations of inequality around the world. In this work, we draw on data on adolescent thinking on social inequality in the Global North alongside comparable emerging data from Argentina, and consider similarities and differences, as well as possible associations between young people's thinking and experiences with the different ways in which economic inequality can be expressed. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on how the analyses conducted here can inform the agenda of developmental psychologists.

In the last decade, developmental psychologists have become increasingly interested in understanding adolescents' thinking and judgments about the socioeconomic context in which they live (e. g. Arsenio & Willems, 2017; Diemer et al., 2019; Elenbass et al., 2020; Kornbluh et al., 2019), probably due to the constant and accelerated increase of inequality at a global level and, in particular, in the United States (see McLoyd, 2019; Ruck et al., 2019). In parallel, inequality levels in Global South countries have remained alarmingly high and stable for several generations without the citizens having enjoyed states of relative equality (Alvaredo et al., 2018). As expected, most psychological research on this problem has been conducted with samples of Western subjects, from Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic countries (hereinafter referred to as WEIRD). Specifically, most of this research work was carried out on USA population, a paradigmatic country of the Global North. Therefore, the evidence available comes from adolescents who have grown up in contexts where economic inequality manifests itself in a particular way, thus impairing the development of a complex understanding of this social problem, given the diverse inequality manifestations around the world (Alvaredo et al., 2018; Assouad et al., 2018).

The reflections presented in this work are based on the evidence available on how USA adolescents perceive economic inequality

(Arsenio & Willems, 2017; Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2019). Then, such findings are compared with those from a study conducted on the same topic and using the same methodology on Argentine adolescents (Barreiro et al., 2019) in order to illustrate potential singularities of adolescents' thinking on the society where they live amid a Global South context (see Cuervo & Miranda, 2019). We use the categories Global South vs Global North since they offer the possibility to go beyond defined geographical-territorial spaces and instead provide a political-critical dimension of analysis. The main purpose of the movement started by the so-called epistemologies of the South (Connell, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2016) is to criticize the hegemonic perspective, as well as to criticize the concept of globalization, which perpetuates the homogenization that was typical of colonial processes. Specifically, the Global South category refers to the common history of colonization and economic submission -still present nowadays- of various regions around the world to the Global North. Thus, the concept of Global South must not be understood as a geographical concept but as a metaphor of human suffering caused by centuries of submission (de Sousa Santos, 2016). Such category includes regions which may have significant differences in terms of culture and even economic and political development. However, all of them have exhibited huge inequalities for centuries which affect the people living there on a daily basis. Thinking of the

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South in these terms makes it possible to point out that even Global North countries have their own South. In other words, every country has a North (dominators) and a South (dominated) (Connell, 2007).

It is important to stress that there are various studies which have addressed social inequality from different perspectives in adolescents, by studying what they think of social classes (see Mistry et al., 2021), how they explain poverty (e. g. Kornbluh et al., 2019) or the possibilities of development of their critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2019), but most of this research came from USA WEIRD samples. This work will specifically focus on studies conducted on adolescents' thinking about the distribution of wealth and their beliefs about justice associated to it (Arsenio & Willems, 2017; Barreiro et al., 2019; Flanagan et al., 2014; Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2019) since they are the only studies identified so far which have used samples of the Global North and South, applying the same methodology and, therefore, the comparisons that can be made between them are more accurate. In addition, the analysis will focus on adolescents given that, if we consider their development in terms of abstract thinking, they can understand the complexity of the social system as a whole and specifically consider the different factors involved in the distribution of wealth (Smetana & Villalobos, 2009). The latter condition is essential for them to explain, for example, the differences between social classes and elaborate complex explanations about social inequality (see Mistry et al., 2021). In contrast, children's thinking about those topics has limitations which would constraint their view of society, adding up to the effects related to the social situations in which they are growing up. Moreover, adolescents have already had several experiences related to social inequality. They also begin to build a persistent and multifaceted sense of self with different motivations (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Adolescence is the time of life in which the increasing independence of thought vis-à-vis parents allows to assume an ideology, understood as a worldview that includes personal and social values (Flanagan & Tucker, 1999). It is a definitive period of lifespan for civic engagement and political participation, since youths begin to assume roles, both on a personal level and in the society of which they are a part, although they still have freedom to explore different possible selves and different social perspectives (Flanagan, 2008; Habermas & Reese, 2015). Hence, during adolescence, youths may begin to see themselves as agents of social transformation. In this line, given the indeterminacy of the adolescent period, when it unfolds in contexts of marked social injustices as the ones from the Global South regions, it is necessary to understand adolescents' thinking about their social context, to design interventions to scaffold their development as agents of social change.

Therefore, the purpose of this work is not to present a literature review on the development of thinking and the judgments related to social inequality since there are previous works which have already addressed these issues (Elenbass et al., 2020; Mistry et al., 2021). Neither does it aim to compare the evidence from the studies reviewed. Instead, it seeks to use them as a resource to illustrate that the ways in which social inequalities are created and perceived are different in terms of history and politics in the various contexts in which the individuals develop. Furthermore, the ways in which relationships among individuals and among social groups in different societies are created are different, as well as the way that individuals regard their sense of belonging to them. Consequently, the possibilities of resistance, transformation and intervention are also different. Against this background, we will consider similarities and differences among comparable studies conducted in different contexts and to reflect on the possible relationships between adolescents' thinking on economic inequality and the distinct characteristics of its manifestations in the societies where they live. In addition, this work also aims to analyze how such reflections may inform the agenda of developmental psychologists in order to contribute to the development of a discipline with a more inclusive approach.

1. The various manifestations of economic inequality and adolescents' thinking on the society where they live

Although the concept of inequality is broad and may entail very different subjective experiences (Sen, 2006), the studies considered in this work focused on the analysis of what adolescents think on inequality, understood in terms of wealth distribution, in the societies where they live (Arsenio & Willems, 2017; Barreiro et al., 2019; Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2019). As we already mentioned, no country completely represents the Global North or the Global South, and the research this work discusses, conducted on a sample of Argentine adolescents (Barreiro et al., 2019), is no more than an open door to some of the possible various manifestations of economic inequality that young people around the world face. Inequality rates in Argentina, and in Latin America as a region, are much higher than in the Global North (Picketti, 2021; Zmerli & Castillo, 2015). Moreover, inequality in Argentina, and in the majority of the Global South, is expressed by the existence of vast social sectors in a situation of poverty. Of course, inequality and poverty also coexist, for instance, in societies such the United States, but it is important to consider that poverty is not a homogenous category (Sen, 2006). Over the last thirty years, poverty rates in Argentina ranged between 30% and 40% of the population, and in certain periods they even exceeded 60% (Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2019). In contrast, during the same period, poverty rates in the United States¹ ranged between 11% and 15% (Semega et al., 2020). Furthermore, in Argentina, as in a great part of the Global South, poverty is chronic (Alvaredo et al., 2018; ECLAC, 2019), that is, people remain poor for very long periods of time, even for generations. Chronicity results in poverty penetrating in and shaping most aspects of the lives of adolescents, compromising their ability to take responsibility for their own future. When poverty is chronic, people suffering from it cannot yearn "better times" or hope for a future in which they will be able to fulfil the "American dream" of social mobility, since they have not known anything different from poverty and there are overwhelmingly high possibilities of future generations suffering from it as well (Hulme & Shepherd, 2003). Particularly, in Argentina, since 1983 -when democracy returned leaving behind a long history of military dictatorships-the 25% of the population in sociodemographic terms can be considered as the "hard core" of the chronic poverty, because they remained in such situation even during periods of national progress. Of this group, 48% are under 15 years of age and another 24% are between ages 15 and 26 (Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento [CIIPEC], 2023). Such data makes evident the widespread impact of chronic poverty on adolescents.

Nevertheless, even in such dramatic contexts, adolescents' experiences with economic inequality vary according to its distribution along vertical and horizontal social dimensions (Stewart, 2008). Vertical inequality refers to what has traditionally been considered as inequality, that is, the vertical alignment of individuals in a society according to their income, thus establishing a gap between rich and poor people. Horizontal inequalities are those that intersect with group categorizations, such those of gender, ethnicity, or religion. For example, in the United States, where wealth is said to be "racialized" (Brown, 2021), the income of Black and Latin middle-class families is around 3500 and 6500 dollars, that is, between 2 and 4% of the \$147,000 income of White middle-class families. It is estimated that between 26 and 28% of Black and Latin households have zero wealth compared to 13% in White households. In addition, among the Fortune 500 CEOs, who account for two thirds of the 1% of the wealthiest households in the United States, only 5 were Black and 17 were Latin, that is, 4% of the total (Inequality.

¹ In Argentina and in the United States, the poverty rate is calculated in terms of the possibility to afford certain goods according to household incomes (Instituto Nacional de Censos y Estadísticas [INDEC], 2022; Semega et al., 2020).

org, 2021). The concept of horizontal inequalities addresses the social position people occupy as a function of their incomes intertwined with the different dimensions constitutive of their socio-cultural identities (e. g., ethnic-racial, national, gender, linguistic). In this sense, the experiences with social inequalities and discrimination cannot be studied from a monolithic approach, but it is necessary to consider their variations even within each social group, particularly in the case of low SES young people who endure multiple forms of oppression. The analysis of the horizontal axes of economic social inequalities, have been mostly depicted by the concept of *intersectionality* (Winker & Degele, 2011) that points to the need to go beyond considering the simple summation of the effects of different oppressive categorizations on individuals, emphasizing the interwoven nature of such social categories and how they can reinforce or weaken each other.

The intersectionality perspective allows researchers to highlight the multiple levels of an oppressive social system, focusing on the effects of such a system on individuals. It also pays greater attention to the socio-historical processes constituting structural oppressions that shape social inequalities (Santos & Toomey, 2018). Inequality in the U.S. is observed mostly in the intersection of both vertical and horizontal dimensions (Stewart et al., 2005). In contrast, wealth inequality in Argentina is very deep along the vertical axis. In this sense, although it is necessary to consider the importance of intersectionality between the vertical and horizontal axes of inequalities, in the case of Argentina its vertical dimension becomes salient, given the overwhelming rates of poverty and its chronicity, making socially invisible the various social categories it intersects with. This phenomenon was also identified in the subjective perception of economic inequality in other countries of the region such as Colombia, where economic inequality is mainly represented by identifying social classes (García Sanchez et al., 2018). In the same vein, although the Argentine society is obviously not exempt from differences and conflicts among various social groups, scientific studies, and official statistics (such as, INDEC, 2022) mainly focus on economic status differences and tend to omit analyses according to race, ethnicity or other dimension of social identities.

Moreover, the fact that the distribution of inequality may be predominantly observed in the horizontal or the vertical axes, or at the intersection of both, is relevant in the sense that vertical inequality rarely has an agglutinating social effect (Otsby, 2013). For example, the 2011 *Occupy Wall-Street* movement was hotly debated precisely because it was anomalous (Yagci, 2017). In contrast, it is horizontal inequality which usually gains social relevance and stimulates political discontent, since it leads to the perception that the economic scarcities experienced are the result of discrimination against the group of belonging. In this way, since it is perceived as a grievance against the in-group and could be interpreted according to the group's history -not because of individual actions-, facilitates collective engagement in actions aimed at transforming the social system (Ostby, 2013).

Given these conditions, it is worth wondering whether the sharp differences between Argentina and the U.S. in terms of economic inequality constitution might lead to differences in how adolescents think about it. In this sense, do everyday experiences with the various forms of extreme inequality enable a more realistic or objective understanding of its proportions and causes, particularly among those who suffer from it? The evidence available suggests that the answers to this question are complex.

On the one hand, the studies conducted agree on the fact that adolescents tend to underestimate the levels of inequality in the distribution of wealth in the society where they live, although they think that such distribution should be more equitable than it is today (e. g. Arsenio & Willems, 2017; Barreiro et al., 2019; Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2019). Similar findings came from studies on adults both from Global North and Global South regions (Niehues, 2014). However, in Argentine adolescents, the gap between their estimation of the existing economic inequality and their ideal distribution model is larger, thus showing more discontent in the way that wealth is distributed in their society,

compared to USA adolescents. This evidence gives support to the hypotheses -based on studies with adults- that perceptions of economic inequality are affected by the inequality of the context where people live (Imhoff, 2021). Moreover, the evidence coming from different studies conducted on USA adolescents agrees in establishing SES as a key factor influencing what they think about social inequality and poverty (e. g. Elenbass et al., 2020; Flanagan et al., 2014; Flanagan et al., 2003; Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2019; Roy et al.; Ruck et al., 2019), and this evidence is in line with that from a sample of Argentine adolescents (Barreiro et al., 2019). However, in USA adolescents, Flanagan and Kornbluh (2019) identified a positive relationship between the education level of their parents -considered as an indicator of SES- and their judgement of the distribution of wealth as being fair. These findings contradict those obtained with Argentine adolescents, where those with a low SES thought that the social distribution of wealth was fairer than their counterparts from middle and high SES (Barreiro et al., 2019), a trend also identified in adults from Chile (Castillo et al., 2012; Segovia & Gamboa, 2015). However, Flanagan and Kornbluh (2019) point out that Black adolescents who participated in their study considered the distribution of wealth in the USA society more equitable than White participants, although unfortunately the authors do not report the SES of the individuals from each ethnic group in their analysis. The latter situation represents a common trend in the studies addressing the understanding of inequality in USA samples: vertical inequalities in terms of SES are studied at their intersection with horizontal inequalities, particularly the ones intertwined with race or ethnic categories, making them homogenous (e. g. Burkholder et al., 2020; Ghavami & Mistry, 2019).

On the other hand, there are profound differences in the evidence available -even that coming from studies carried out in U. S. - in relation to how everyday experiences of economic inequality influence adolescents' explanations of it. Some findings state that a higher educational level of the parents, together with family discussions about society -which in turn are more frequent in middle-class sectors- enable a complex understanding of inequalities by adolescents, that is, explanations that include the influence of historical and socioeconomic factors in their composition, overcoming explanations based on individual factors such as personal effort (e.g. Flanagan et al., 2014). Therefore, the abstract discussions on inequality in which adolescents from middle-class sectors seem to participate more frequently would have a larger impact on their understanding than the deep experiences with it, characteristic of poor social sectors. In contrast, there are also studies suggesting that a higher exposure to violent neighborhoods where marginalized groups usually live in the U. S., such as Latin or Black ones, together with their everyday experiences related to economic inequality, increase their understanding of the complex structural causes of social inequality and, with them, the probability of adolescents getting involved in actions to revert it (e.g. Roy et al., 2019).

There is also evidence indicating that, in general, USA adolescents regard personal effort as the main driver of people's socioeconomic status, ignoring historical, economic and political factors (Flanagan et al., 2014; Mistry et al., 2021). In this sense, their explanations about poverty are individualistic and reductionist. Similar evidence comes from studies with adults in Argentina (Gatica et al., 2017) and Mexico (Sainz et al., 2023). Besides, although the U. S. has one of the lowest social mobility rates among industrialized countries (Piketty & Saez, 2001), adolescents systematically overestimate the possibilities of social mobility and believe that the "American dream" of social climbing is possible through personal effort (Flanagan et al., 2014; Kraus & Tan, 2015). In this way, they also think that everyone can overcome poverty as long as they make an effort, blaming those who are in such situation (Flanagan et al., 2014; Flanagan et al., 2007; Kornbluh et al., 2019). Furthermore, although social class is an important category influencing the way adolescents think of other and themselves, they think that people can change social classes at will, but that is not the case with other categories related to horizontal inequalities such as race or

ethnicity (see Mistry et al., 2021).

This tendency to underestimate economic inequality and overestimate the possibilities of social mobility is usually interpreted as the expression of beliefs that contribute to justify the economic system (Flanagan et al., 2014; Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2019). Although these beliefs operate by hiding structural factors that undermine the possibilities of people to improve their social position, they increase people's subjective feeling of control and optimism about their future (Jost, 2020; Jost et al., 2003). In this sense, Flanagan and Kornbluh (2019) inform that Black adolescents, in comparison to White adolescents, have a more positive view about the distribution of wealth in the USA society, in line with the findings of the theory of system justification (Jost, 2020) which highlight the need to deny the injustices suffered in order to cope with the anguish they generate and thus be able to maintain a positive image of oneself. In line with the U.S. Black students from Flanagan and Kornbluh (2019) study, Argentine adolescents of low SES status consider the distribution of wealth in their society as more equitable compared to their counterparts of middle- and high-class sectors, without having distinctive ethnic categorizations or background between them. In addition, Argentine adolescents from lower SES schools rated higher on *general belief in a just world* (Dalbert, 1999; Lerner & Clayton, 2011), i. e., they believe that the world is a just place where everyone gets what deserve. This relation between poverty and the highly support of meritocratic ideological beliefs that tends to justify social injustices is not surprising, it has been identified in adults from different social contexts more or less egalitarians (Jost, 2020; García-Sánchez et al., 2021), even from Latin America (Imhoff, 2021). However, Argentinean adolescents from low SES also rate lower on *personal belief in a just world* (Dalbert, 1999), a combination that would express a particular perspective on the social world and their personal trajectories on it. Specifically, Argentine adolescents who are socioeconomically less favored seem to consider that people obtain what they deserve, but at the same time, they believe this general rule of justice does not apply to their own lives (Barreiro et al., 2019). Similar results referred to believing in the possibility of social mobility, although not applicable to them, were obtained with Black high school students in the United States (Mickelson, 1990). Such beliefs operate by blaming people in a social disadvantaged position -their in-group- by shifting the causes of their situation from socio-structural factors to individual factors. In this sense, there is evidence that the justification of unjust economic systems by those in a disadvantaged position is a way of coping with the anguish generated by their situation—a way of coping that entails long-term psychological costs as it is, for example, negatively associated with self-esteem and well-being, and can lead to the development of affective ambivalence, internalization of stigmas, and depression (Jost, 2020). This tendency to justify the system is at the basis of the resistance to the transformation of the status quo, even though people consider it unjust, and it is therefore negatively related to political participation. Thus, the theory of system justification appeals to the Marxist concept of “false consciousness” as a fundamental illusion that leads to the naturalization of the current social order and the ongoing oppression of disadvantaged social groups at the same time.

Overall, the evidence available seems to indicate that social disadvantaged adolescents, even in a context of chronic poverty, embrace an optimistic view about the possibility of social mobility in general, in coexistence with a fatalist view about their own experiences and future. The waiving of agency about their own future due to a destiny fixed by factors which are external to their own action might be a consequence of the multigenerational experience of chronic poverty or historic subordination, suffered by people who in fact have never had the possibility to forge their own destiny. A similar psychological phenomenon has been named *Latin American fatalist syndrome* (Martín-Baró, 1987) and refers to the cognitive/behavioral consequences of social oppression which a large number of sectors of the Latin American population have suffered for centuries, which would lead them to think that their destiny does not depend on them but has already been determined by a superior force

and, therefore, they have no other option but to withstand that unavoidable suffering. In this vein, different studies show that poverty contexts negatively affect the development of civic identity and civic engagement (Hart et al., 2011). Moreover, unlike other countries from South America (e. g. Chile or Colombia), in Argentina the rhetoric on social justice development based on equality of rights has a long social history crystalized, from example, in the free access to public education including university (Ruiz, 2023). However, such kind of social achievements can lead to the invisibilization of the profound inequalities that still pervade Argentine society and may have paradoxical effects by giving rise to fatalistic beliefs about the future and personal social mobility (Oishi et al., 2022; McCall et al., 2017). For example, there is evidence that in countries like Chile with one of the highest levels of economic inequality in Latin America but with a lower rate of chronic poverty than Argentina, the perceptions of social inequalities increase intolerance to it and the openness to redistributive policies (García-Castro et al., 2021). In this line, following the theory of relative deprivation, of greater acceptance when thinking about involvement in social change actions, it is necessary to have unmet expectations or social unrest to promote change (Dawtry et al., 2019).

Going back to Argentine adolescents in particular, although it has not been specifically studied how these beliefs influence their everyday decisions, preliminary results suggest that those belonging to a low socioeconomic status imagine their future in a restricted way, focusing on interpersonal goals (e.g. having a family, having many friends), and disregarding goals related to their professional or university education (Barreiro, Wainryb, & Arsenio, 2021), which would contribute to their possibilities of social mobility. Although education in Argentina in all its levels -included the higher- is tuition free, Argentine adolescents of low economic resources, unlike their counterparts of middle- or high-class sectors, do not regard it as their own future goal.

An additional factor that is worth considering when analyzing the relatively benevolent judgments of Argentine adolescents from low SES about economic inequality in the society where they live is the way it is created. As we already mention, in societies like USA, where vertical inequality exists mostly in intersection with horizontal inequalities, adolescents from SES ethnic minorities can link their social exclusion experiences with the economic inequalities that undermine the lives of Black” and Latin people in that society (Roy et al., 2019). In this sense, it is considerably easier to understand that a particular social group is being socially excluded than to understand how structural factors produce and reinforce poverty (McLoyd, 2019). Therefore, to the extent that wealth inequality in Argentina is mainly structured along the vertical axis, it is possible that the scarcity of salient in-group identities hinders the possibilities of adolescents from low SES to develop a similar critical attitude to the inequality they suffer from. As we already pointed out, in studying the development of critical consciousness development on poor US adolescents from ethnic minorities (Black and Latin) Roy et al. (2019) found that their daily contact with injustices and violence allows them to understand social inequalities in a more complex way and to be willing to involve in social transformative actions. Such evidence seems to contradict the justification of social injustices based on individual merit and the higher denial of social inequalities in low SES Argentine adolescents (Barreiro et al., 2019). However, this apparent contradiction may be resolved if we consider that identifying with a particular social group, such as being Black or Latin, makes more likely to engage in transformative social actions (Otsby, 2013). In horizontal inequalities scenarios (between social groups), where poverty intersects with, for example, ethnic or religious identities, there is a stronger tendency to become politically involved to defend the group one identifies with, instead of doing it only for oneself, favoring participation in group grievances leading to citizen mobilization (Dawtry et al., 2019; Otsby, 2013).

Finally, even when acknowledging that the beliefs of Argentine adolescents from low socioeconomic sectors might be influenced by the tendency to justify the economic system (Jost, 2020), possibly

exacerbated by the distinct characteristics of inequality (its magnitude, extent, and mainly vertical distribution), additional relevant factors should also be considered, related to very recent Argentine economic and political history. The adolescents in the study conducted by Barreiro et al. (2019) grew up in a period of 12 years during which the Argentine government supported a strong rhetoric based on social justice principles and considerably increased the social welfare budget, reducing the poverty rate from around 50% to 30% (in 2013 where the data was gathered) and the unemployment rate from 20% to less than 10% (Deveraux, 2015). In view of this, it is possible that the judgments of adolescents from low SES do not necessary, or exclusively, reflect a tendency to the justification of the status quo. In fact, despite the ongoing inequality and chronic poverty, the Argentine adolescents' beliefs on meritocratic social mobility in their country might express an effect of their hope in a possible better general social situation (Evans & Kelley, 2017; Oishi et al., 2022). However, there is evidence showing that when the expected social mobility is suspected to result from illegitimate practices (e. g. corruption), as it seems to be the case for Argentine population independently from their SES position (Barreiro & Ungaretti, 2020; Barreiro, Ungaretti, & Bruno, 2021), these are likely to sadden people (Evans & Kelley, 2017). Hence, it is possible that the low SES Argentinean adolescent's fatalistic beliefs reflect this disenchantment rooted in the moral degradation of social bonds in Argentinean like in the rest of South America (Latinobarómetro, 2021). In more general terms, this information about the historical-political context of the adolescents during the data collection period also stresses that the characteristics of inequality -in Argentina and everywhere else- are not static, and that it is of paramount importance to consider the material and ideological conditions when analyzing adolescents' thinking about them.

2. Drawing up a possible agenda for future developmental psychology

Despite the overwhelming increase of social inequality over decades all around the world, the constitutive conditions and characteristics of inequality vary from one region to another. In this work, we considered the data from USA and Argentine adolescents as a means to show some of the dimensions that shape what has been studied as economic inequality and to reflect on how they can influence adolescents' thinking about it. The tendencies identified suggest some general similarities and some potential differences between those who have grown up in a context of extreme inequality with a wide social sector in a situation of chronic poverty – at least 25% since 1983-, that is, common conditions among the various regions of the Global South, and those who grew up in a society with high levels of inequality, but not in such an alarming situation in terms of poverty. These findings warrant further research and more in-depth analyses in future works.

In general, adolescents seem to underestimate economic inequality in the society where they live, a point that has already been made in relation to adults from different regions around the world, including societies with the higher levels of social inequality as Latin America (Imhoff, 2021; Niehues, 2014). However, studies conducted so far have not focused on how large the gap is between adolescents' estimations on inequality and the extent of real inequality in the context where they live. Does the size of this gap vary -that is, the extent to which adolescents underestimate inequality- according to their context, and is this variation important? It might be speculated that such estimations could be more accurate (that is, showing a smaller gap) in the Global South regions, where inequality rates are higher; but according to the evidence presented in this work, it is also possible that a higher level of inequality might be accompanied by a greater tendency to justify the economic system, which in turn might lead to less accurate estimations by adolescents (that is, a larger gap) in relation to the magnitude of inequality. Similarly, in general terms, a gap was identified between adolescents' estimations of the level of inequality in their country and their

judgments about what a fair or ideal distribution should be. In fact, this gap is coherent with a pattern observed in adults from over 30 countries, both in the Global South and the Global North (International Social Survey Programme [ISSP], 2009). However, although the preference for a more egalitarian ideal distribution than the current one seems to be shared by adolescents and adults from different social contexts, it is still unclear whether the magnitude of the gap between the estimated distribution for the society where they live and the distribution they consider ideal varies significantly among countries with different types of inequality and whether such variation matters to adolescents' development, whether it translates into different levels of civic or political engagement, or different forms of political participation. Another issue which deserves further study is whether the differences between the actual levels of social inequality and the adolescents' underestimation of the inequality or their judgments about how much more egalitarian their societies should be are bigger among those who are more affected by inequality, particularly adolescents in the Global South regions.

Of course, the possible answers to these questions go beyond the accurate measurement of the size of a specific gap. It is about how adolescents from very different societies, particularly adolescents belonging to the lowest socioeconomic sectors of very different societies, cope with the particular type of inequalities that restricts their lives, whether it is expressed by overwhelmingly high rates of chronic poverty, by the intersection of experiences related to poverty and a history of collective grievance and discrimination, or both. Addressing these problems not only requires research in the field of developmental psychology which overcomes the limits of samples of WEIRD subjects, but also entails going beyond the use of scales and self-administered questionnaires, supplementing them with data collection strategies aimed at getting closer to the specific experiences of people with inequality, for which it is also necessary to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. For instance, as mentioned above, the most benevolent evaluations by Argentine adolescents from low socioeconomic sectors on the rates of inequality in their society, compared to their counterparts in a more advantageous social position, might be interpreted both as the expression of a tendency to justify the economic system that would hide social injustices, exacerbated by the vertical distribution of inequality in this society, and as a reflection of the actual and recent improvement of the economic situation of great part of the Argentine population. An in-depth analysis of the local historic, economic, and political processes would make it possible to build a more complex interpretative framework, examining competing explanations in detail. As the psychology of inequality accumulates empirical findings, it is also important to find theoretical tools to make sense of divergent findings and the reflections presented in this work highlight the importance of a sociocultural approach (Oishi et al., 2022).

It is remarkable that a great deal of the research works conducted have adopted an intersectional approach to study whether, and how, race/ethnicity, gender, and other social categories influence adolescents' judgments of the society where they live, building a very productive path for developmental psychology (Morrow & Boyden, 2019). However, such investigations do not thoroughly address the historic, economic, and political factors affecting the creation, maintenance, and transformation of inequality situations in each particular context. In addition, although the designs of most of the studies conducted in U.S. included social groups in which vertical and horizontal inequalities are intersected, research on adolescents' thinking has exclusively focused on their judgments about economic inequality in the vertical axis, even though it is horizontal inequalities that are usually more evident in terms of gaining critical sociopolitical attention. Hence, building on the existing literature focused on horizontal inequalities is likely to improve the understanding of what adolescents, even Americans, think about the society where they live.

Finally, the research findings are not independent from the methodologies used for assessing adolescents' thinking about economic

inequality (Jachimowicz et al., 2022; Norton & Ariely, 2011). It is worth stressing that inequality is clearly something more than a series of population percentiles and mathematical ratios (Evans & Kelley, 2017). It is possible that adolescents, both in the Global North and South, are not able to accurately estimate the extent of inequality in their countries, but young people around the world have experiences with inequality, know people who enjoy certain luxuries and others whose situation is critical. Therefore, following the proposal made by researchers on the subjective perception of inequalities in adults (e. g. García Castro et al., 2022; García-Castro et al., 2019; García Sanchez, 2018), adolescents need to be asked about the tangible manifestations of inequality that they have experienced in their daily lives; they might be asked how they think such inequalities impact -for better or for worse- their own lives and the lives of other people with more and fewer economic resources than them; they might be asked whether such inequalities should be repaired and, if that is possible, what measures would be required. Adolescents around the world also know someone who is poor, even when they are not poor themselves, or at least they can think of someone who is the poorest person they know. Therefore, they might be asked to mention what they know, or what they can imagine, about what it is like to be poor. These narrative explorations would make it possible to get closer to experience -when it is not possible to observe it directly, something that for many reasons is usually very difficult- which would provide a better understanding of the global trends and particular meanings of adolescents' experiences of economic inequality in unequal countries around the world. For example, it is quite possible that what appears as a tendency towards the justification of the economic system at first sight has, in fact, very different meanings to adolescents from different regions, and even to the more and less privileged adolescents within the same society.

Understanding how adolescents think, justify or critique economic inequality is highly relevant for developmental psychology, not only because it involves the judgments of adolescents on one of the most important moral issues of our time, but also because it is probable that such understanding has an impact on adolescents' actions or the lack thereof in relation to inequality. In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. addressed the *American Psychological Association* Convention and urged psychologists to contribute to the development of what he called "creative maladjustment", that is, the type of attitudinal and behavioral discontent that underlies the rejection of and resistance to prevailing injustices. To answer this call, research programs may address the material and cultural conditions that shape adolescents' perceptions, judgments, and behaviors in relation to economic inequality in their specific context in order to provide tools aimed at designing educational interventions to encourage young people's critical reflection and transformative action in relation to the inequalities that threaten their own wellbeing and that of their communities.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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