

Income Mobility Breeds Tolerance for Income Inequality: Cross-National and Experimental Evidence

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Azim F. Shariff¹, Dylan Wiwad², and Lara B. Aknin²

¹Department of Psychology, University of Oregon and ²Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

American politicians often justify income inequality by referencing the opportunities people have to move between economic stations. Though past research has shown associations between income mobility and resistance to wealth redistribution policies, no experimental work has tested whether perceptions of mobility influence tolerance for inequality. In this article, we present a cross-national comparison showing that income mobility is associated with tolerance for inequality and experimental work demonstrating that perceptions of higher mobility directly affect attitudes toward inequality. We find support for both the prospect of upward mobility and the view that peoples' economic station is the product of their own efforts, as mediating mechanisms.

Keywords

income inequality, income mobility, social mobility, fairness

There is income inequality in America, there always has been, and hopefully, and I do say that, there always will be. Why? Because people rise to different levels of success based on what they contribute to society

—Rick Santorum, 2012

Inequality is as dear to the American heart as liberty itself

—William Dean Howells, 1894

From Alexis de Tocqueville to Henry Clay to Marco Rubio, pundits and politicians have argued for centuries that income inequality in the United States is acceptable because of the opportunities that Americans have for social mobility. At the core of this “American Dream” has been the idea that though there may be great disparities between the poor and rich, people have the opportunity to move between economic stations through their own efforts. Is this, however, how people really think? Can people's concerns over income inequality be tempered by the belief in a mobile society?

Psychologists have studied questions related to fairness and social inequities for decades (e.g., Jost & Banaji,

1994; Lerner & Miller, 1978; McCoy & Major, 2007). This research has detailed a number of psychological strategies people use to justify inequality (e.g., Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). In this article, we build on this important work by looking at societal fairness at the macroeconomic level and specifically discussing how peoples' perceptions of income mobility directly affect tolerance for inequality.

That this question has yet to be experimentally tested is surprising considering the substantial interest in these concepts. Among the public, rising income inequality in the United States and elsewhere (OECD, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Piketty & Saez, 2014; Saez & Zucman, 2014) has prompted fervent discussion and debate about disparities of wealth and opportunity—sparking new protest movements and forcing engagement from politicians of all persuasions. Income inequality has also commanded the interest of researchers from across the social sciences. For instance, economists have shown that societal health indices (violence, obesity, education, teen pregnancy,

Corresponding Author:

Azim F. Shariff, 1227 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97401
E-mail: shariff@uoregon.edu

interpersonal distrust, etc.) are better predicted by inequality between those in a society rather than the wealth of the society overall (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Meanwhile, several researchers have highlighted how inaccurate people are in their estimates of where they stand in the income distribution and how unequal their societies are (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Perhaps unsurprisingly, people's views about their own relative position influence their attitudes toward redistribution; when people who had overestimated their position in the income distribution learn about their actual (relatively poorer) status, they show more support for redistributive policies (Cruces, Perez-Truglia, & Tetaz, 2003, see also Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005). Similarly, when those who underestimated their position learn about their relatively more privileged status, they reduce support for redistribution (Karadja, Mollerstrom, & Seim, 2014). Consistent with these findings, Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, Kay, and Payne (2015) showed that increasing people's subjective feeling of status in laboratory tasks also reduces support for redistribution. Thus, past research demonstrates that people hold inaccurate views of how wealth is distributed within societies and perceptions of a person's own relative status can influence support for governmental policies for reducing inequality through redistribution.

Very little research, however, has examined the relationship between income mobility—the ability for people to move between economic stations along the income ladder—and income inequality. Recently, psychologists have shown that just as people are inaccurate in their inequality estimates, they are similarly ignorant of how rigidly immobile their country is (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015). Recent work by economists and political scientists has shown correlations between levels of mobility and support for redistributive policies such that the more mobile the society, the less support there is for governmental efforts such as increasing taxation on the rich (e.g., Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005; Bjørnskov, Dreher, Fischer, Schnellenbach, & Gehring, 2013; Dabalén, Parinduri, & Paul, 2015; Jaime-Castillo & Marqués-Perales, 2014). However, none of these studies examine how perceptions of income mobility influence attitudes about income inequality. Indeed, the above studies use correlational designs, which preclude conclusions of causality. In addition, past research has focused on endorsement for specific governmental policies addressing inequality (namely redistribution), which prevents an understanding of people's fundamental attitudes about inequality. Surveys show that, though there is a broad dissatisfaction with inequality, there is considerable disagreement regarding the methods to address it (Newport, 2015; Pew Research Center, U.S. Politics and Policy, 2014): It is clearly possible to both detest inequality and disagree with governmental efforts to redistribute

wealth. As a result, the endorsement for redistribution does not fully mirror actual attitudes about inequality.

To determine whether income mobility—and beliefs about income mobility—directly affect tolerance for inequality, we supplement our discussion with several empirical tests. First, we make use of large-scale, cross-national survey data to investigate whether mobility is related to attitudes about income inequality at the national level. Though prior research conducted in the United States has tied mobility levels to support for redistributive policies at the state level (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005), we seek to broaden this investigation by testing whether mobility predicts inequality tolerance across several nations. As such, we can extend the scope of investigation beyond one country (the United States) and look beyond specific policies aimed at alleviating inequality to instead focus on people's attitudes toward inequality.

Second, and more important to note, we use experimental methods to investigate whether perceptions of mobility causally affect people's tolerance for inequality. To do so, we manipulate perceptions of income mobility within a large economically representative sample of Americans, before measuring attitudes toward inequality, as well as a number of potentially mediating variables. This treatment represents, to our knowledge, the first large-scale study to directly manipulate mobility perceptions. It, thus, provides one of the first opportunities to test the causal impact that people's understanding of income mobility affects economic attitudes.

Do Countries With More Mobility Show a Higher Degree of Tolerance for Income Inequality?

Corak (2013) collated dozens of sources to provide national levels of income mobility for 25 countries. By calculating the intergenerational income elasticity between a father's and his son's income, Corak's measure captures the degree to which the difference between one generation's income is associated with the differences among their children's income. For example, take two fathers with two sons in a society where intergenerational income elasticity is 0.2. A 100% difference in income between the fathers would result in a 20% difference in earning between the adulthood income of the sons. To test whether intergenerational mobility predicted attitudes toward inequality, we analyzed these mobility ratings on survey data measuring dissatisfaction in relation to inequality drawn from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)'s 2009 survey on Social Inequality (40 countries, $n = 55,238$) in which respondents indicated agreement to the statement, "Differences in income in <the respondent's country> are too large". Figure 1 shows

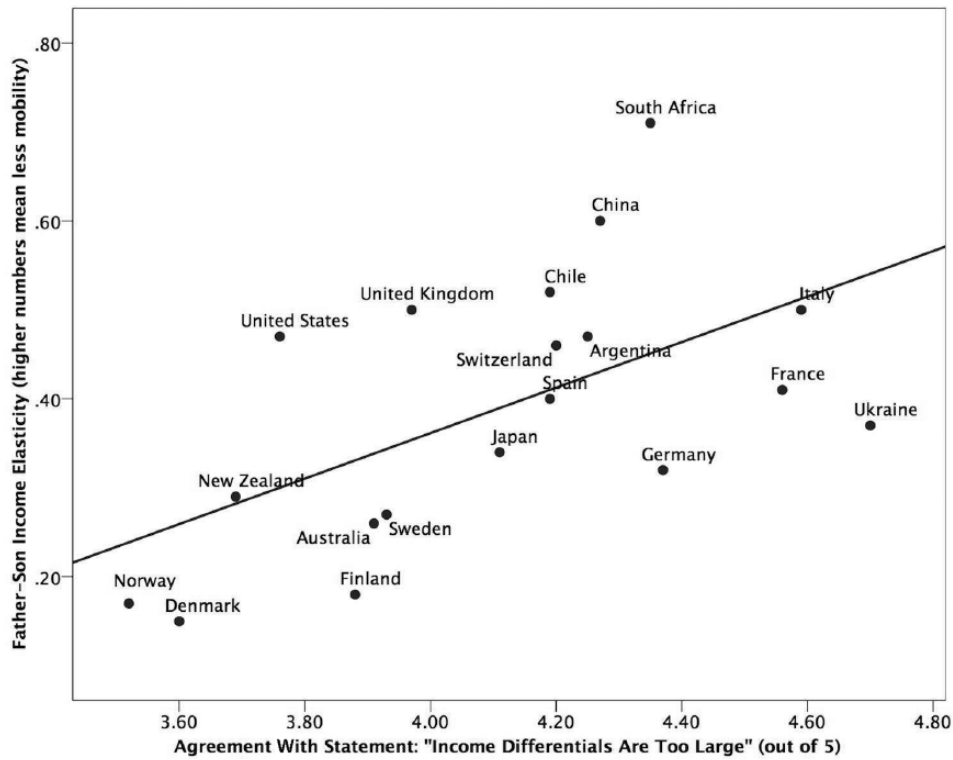


Fig. 1. Cross-national income mobility and the dissatisfaction with the size of income differentials ($\beta = 0.57, p = .003$).

the relationship between father-son income elasticity and country-level means for responses to the inequality tolerance item, $\beta = 0.57, p = .003$. The data show clearly that the less economically mobile the country, the more dissatisfied people were with income differentials.

Given that tolerance for income inequality varies across countries, we used a multilevel model to account for individual- and country-level variables. Indeed, to confirm that multilevel modeling was appropriate for these data, we ran an unconditional random analysis of variance (i.e., the “null model”), entering merely the grouping variable (country) and our outcome variable, tolerance for inequality, into Model 1 (Table 1). This analysis demonstrated that there is significant country-level variability in tolerance for inequality ($\tau_{00} = .10, p = .002$), suggesting that multilevel modeling is justified for the present data.

At the individual level (Level 1), we included as covariates age, gender, social class, education, and an item measuring perceived wage-gap inequality, all taken from the ISSP survey. For the perceived wage-gap measure, following Kiatpongsan and Norton (2014), we divided people’s estimates for the income of an unskilled worker by their estimates for that of a CEO. At the country level (Level 2), we included gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (World Bank, 2009) and the Gini index (World Bank, 2009, 2010)—a measure of income inequality. For

both these economic variables, 2008 figures (and when not available, 2009 figures) were used to be closely aligned with the 2008 ISSP survey data (see Supplemental Material available online for a discussion about the time alignment of these variables). Full country-level data were available for 19 countries, leaving an eligible sample of 27,979 survey respondents. Additionally, we removed any participant who had missing data on one or more of our covariates (e.g., age, gender, etc.). Following this list-wise deletion, we were left with a final sample of 19,669 participants. We entered only income mobility into Model 2 (Table 1). This analysis demonstrates that, without any covariates, countries with more income mobility are more tolerant of inequality, $\beta = 1.26, p < .01$. Last, in Model 3 (Table 1) we included all of our Level 1 (gender, age, social class, education, and perceived wage gap) and Level 2 covariates (GDP per capita and Gini). This analysis demonstrates that, when controlling for various country-wise and individual variables, income mobility remains a strong predictor of tolerance for inequality, $\beta = 2.06, p < .001$.¹ In fact, the level of immobility in a country emerged as a stronger predictor of dissatisfaction with inequality than did the level of inequality itself (Table 1).

These results suggest that even after controlling for a number of individual- and country-level factors, those

Table 1. Summary of the Multilevel Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Agreement With the Statement “Differences in Income in <the Respondent’s Country> Are Too Large”

Variable	Model 1: Unconditional		Model 2: Income mobility only		Model 3: Full nested model	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Intercept (γ_{00})	4.072	0.070	3.59	0.16	4.568	0.404
Fixed effects						
Level 1 variables						
Social class (γ_{10})	—		—		-0.127***	0.006
Education (γ_{20})	—		—		-0.009**	0.002
Perceived wage gap (γ_{30})	—		—		0.000	0.000
Gender (γ_{40})	—		—		0.124***	0.013
Age (γ_{50})	—		—		0.003***	0.001
Level 2 variables						
Income elasticity (γ_{01})	—		1.257**	0.402	2.063***	0.550
2008 GDP per capita (γ_{02})	—		—		0.000	0.000
2008/09 Gini coefficient (γ_{03})	—		—		-0.016	0.011
Random effects						
Residual (σ^2)	0.786		0.786		0.803	
Intercept (τ_{00})	0.098**		0.066**		0.050**	
R^2	—		0.04		0.05	

Note: $n1 = 19$, $n2 = 19,669$. Three decimal places are provided because of small but significant values.
 $*p < .05$. $**p < .01$. $***p < .001$.

nations where mobility is highest also happen to have populations with less dissatisfaction with inequality. Or, put the other way, a lack of mobility is associated with finding inequality less tolerable. Despite this intriguing relationship, the correlational nature of these data prevent us from drawing the conclusion that mobility—or, more specifically, the perception of mobility—directly affects inequality attitudes. Moreover, although these data draw an association between the extant mobility in a society and the society’s views on inequality, our key question is how the psychologically more proximate mechanism of mobility perceptions affects inequality attitudes. Indeed, in light of recent research demonstrating that people hold wildly inaccurate estimates of actual mobility (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015), we cannot safely assume that differences in actual mobility between countries accurately reflect differences in mobility perceptions. To address these unresolved questions, we turned to experimental methods.

Do Perceptions of Higher Mobility Increase Tolerance for Income Inequality?

To directly test whether perceptions of income mobility reduce concerns about inequality, we opted to conduct an experiment in which we manipulated people’s perceptions of income mobility in their society. To do so,

we recruited a sample of 521 Americans (381 female, M age = 48.80, $SD = 14.02$) for an online survey using Qualtrics Panels. Given that our key variables of interest were income inequality attitudes, which surveys show vary across the income spectrum (Newport, 2015; see also Pew Research Center, U.S. Politics and Policy, 2014), we made efforts to recruit a large and economically representative sample of the United States by ensuring that we drew at least 100 participants from each of five income quintiles using the 2012 pretax household income ranges provided by the U.S. Department of Commerce (Table 2). Quintiles did not differ by age or political identification but did significantly differ ($p < .05$) in gender breakdown, with more males in the top quintile (46.2%) than in the others (22.1%). As a result, all of the between-quintiles analyses below control for gender, though results remain meaningfully unchanged if gender is not controlled for.

Participants were randomly assigned to read mock news articles reporting either high or low rates of social mobility in the United States (see the Supplemental Material available online). Articles appeared to be from *The Economist* newspaper and described the current state of mobility in the United States. The articles were identical in the first three paragraphs—in which the concepts of income mobility and income quintiles were explained—but differed in their titles and in the last paragraph, which discussed the level of mobility in the United States both in absolute terms and in comparison to European countries.

Table 2. Sampling From U.S. Pretax Income Ranges of the Five Income Quintiles

Quintile	Income range	<i>n</i>
Bottom	\$20,599 and under	105
Second	\$20,599–\$39,764	104
Third	\$39,765–\$64,582	104
Fourth	\$64,583–\$104,096	104
Top	\$104,097 and over	104

For example, the low-mobility article (titled “An Immobile Dream”) read that Harvard and Berkeley economists have shown that “Real social mobility is much closer to zero and economists predict that, ten years from now, most people will have barely moved from the quintile they are currently in.” Whereas, in the high mobility article (titled “Mobile Indeed”) those economists showed that “Real social mobility, though not complete, is very high, and economists predict that, ten years from now, most people will have moved from the quintile they are currently in, and many will have moved several quintiles away.” After reading their assigned passage, participants spent 3 to 4 min reflecting on what the articles meant for their future.

We then measured their tolerance for inequality using a three-item scale (e.g., “I think that the current amount of income inequality in the United States is unacceptable.”), with anchors ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.94$), along with estimates of mobility, affect, and several other potential mediators and moderators described below.

We first wanted to investigate whether our manipulation was successful in shifting attitudes about income mobility. To do so, we compared the two groups on their estimates of the odds that the average American would have moved rather than remained in roughly the same relative position on the income ladder after 10 years. Confirming the effect of the manipulation, compared to those in the low mobility condition, those who read the article indicating that mobility was high did indeed

estimate it was more likely that the average American would have moved (Table 3).

Looking across experimental groups, those in the higher quintiles were more satisfied with the level of social mobility, $r(521) = .22$, $p < .001$, and more tolerant with current levels of income inequality, $r(521) = .22$, $p < .001$ (see Figs. S2 and S3 in the Supplemental Material available online). It should be noted, though, that even in the top quintile, the average participant generally felt that current levels of mobility were too low ($M = 37.75$, $SD = 18.26$), significantly lower than the midpoint of 50 labeled, “About right,” $t(103) = 6.84$, $p < .001$, and that income differentials were generally unfair ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.88$), significantly higher than the scale midpoint of 4 (*neither agree nor disagree*), $t(103) = 2.12$, $p = .036$.

In terms of our main predictions, we find that those participants who read the high-mobility article reported greater satisfaction with the current level of income mobility in the United States than did those who read that mobility was low (Table 3). Most important to note, those in the high-mobility condition were more accepting of income inequality than those in the low-mobility condition (Table 3). Finally, satisfaction with the current level of mobility mediated the effect of condition on inequality intolerance: Using a bootstrapping approach with 1,000 resamples, we found that the indirect effect was significant, $b = -0.12$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.19, -0.06]$.

Our manipulation did influence positive affect levels, as measured by the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Participants randomly assigned to read the low-mobility article reported lower levels of positive affect than participants assigned to read the high-mobility article (Table 3). It is important to note, however, affect differences do not account for the effect of mobility perceptions on tolerance for inequality; adding positive affect as a covariate to our key analysis leaves the effect of condition significant, $F(1, 518) = 6.68$, $p = .01$. Moreover, positive affect does not significantly mediate the on inequality attitudes, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.018$, 95% CI $[-0.02, 0.06]$, n.s.

Table 3. Mean Differences (SDs in Parentheses) Between Conditions for Tested Variables

Variable	Low-mobility condition	High-mobility condition	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Likelihood of movement for average American after 10 years (%)	45.22 (33.29)	52.52 (32.39)	5.70	<.001
Satisfaction with current levels of mobility (%)	28.87 (19.58)	36.01 (17.52)	4.38	<.001
Inequality intolerance (out of 7)	5.18 (1.58)	4.77 (1.85)	-2.71	.007
Estimated change in own relative income after 10 years (%)	8.02 (16.78)	10.69 (19.34)	1.68	.093
Estimated change from current relative income to children’s income when same age (%)	15.10 (26.68)	20.33 (28.30)	2.17	.030
Degree to which economic status due to own efforts (100) vs. external circumstances (0)	54.08 (30.07)	59.65 (30.24)	2.10	.036
Positive affect	46.15 (21.96)	51.29 (22.58)	2.63	.009

Why might mobility make income inequality tolerable? In the economic literature, two mutually compatible mechanisms have been proposed, focusing on what may be understood as hope and fairness, respectively. The first mechanism is the *Prospect Of Upward Mobility* (POUM; Benabou & Ok, 2001), which suggests that people are willing to tolerate the vaulted position of the rich because they hope that they or their children may move into those ranks, and they thus want to maintain the advantages of their future economic station. The second mechanism is the idea that equal opportunities allow people to attain their economic station by their own efforts rather than through circumstances outside of their control, such as accidents of birth and inequities of opportunity (e.g., Bjørnskov et al., 2013; Fong, 2006; McCoy & Major, 2007). We tested whether both of these mechanisms mediated the effect of condition on inequality intolerance independently and in combination.

Testing the POUM hypothesis

After reading the assigned mobility prime, we asked participants to indicate on a number line where they believed they currently fell in terms of relative income (0–100th percentile). Next, participants indicated where on that same spectrum they expected to be in 10 years (intragenerational mobility) and where they expected their children would be when they reached the same age as the respondent currently was (intergenerational mobility). For example, 35-year-old respondents indicated their current relative economic standing, their predicted relative economic standing at age 45, and where they estimated their (real or hypothetical) children to fall on the same economic ladder at age 35. We produced measures of intra- and intergenerational mobility by calculating the difference score between each participant's estimate of their current economic standing and their estimate for where they would be in 10 years (intragenerational) and where their children would be at the participant's current age (intergenerational).

On average, participants thought both they and their children would experience upward mobility. One-sample *t*-tests comparing mean mobility estimate difference scores against 0, which would reflect no change in relative income standing, indicated that participants expected significant upward mobility for themselves ($M = 9.31\%$, $SD = 18.10\%$, $t(520) = 11.72$, $p < .001$), and their children ($M = 17.63\%$, $SD = 27.58\%$, $t(520) = 14.59$, $p < .001$). Notably, participants expected their children to rise more than themselves, $t(520) = 8.42$, $p < .001$, perhaps because of the longer time horizon (see Supplemental Material available online for how these effects differ between quintiles).

Testing the POUM hypothesis, we examined whether participants' estimations of intra- and intergenerational mobility predicted greater tolerance for inequality. Collapsed across conditions, we found that people who

anticipated greater mobility for themselves and their children were more tolerant of inequality (intragenerational: $\beta = 0.14$, $t(519) = 3.28$, $p = .001$; intergenerational: $\beta = 0.19$, $t(519) = 4.49$, $p < .001$) effects that held after controlling for quintile (intragenerational: $\beta = 0.10$, $t(518) = 2.34$, $p = .02$; intergenerational: $\beta = 0.12$, $t(518) = 2.53$, $p = .01$). However, when both intra- and intergenerational mobility estimates were entered simultaneously, only intergenerational mobility had an independent significant effect ($\beta = 0.17$), $t(518) = 3.15$, $p = .002$. These findings join a chorus of correlational studies supporting the POUM hypothesis (e.g., Buscha, 2012; Rainer & Siedler, 2008), albeit with the important caveat that the prospects of upward mobility for people's children may be more powerful a factor than the prospects of people's own mobility.

To test whether perceptions of mobility mediated the effect of the high- and low-mobility primes on inequality tolerance, we first examined the impact of the experimental manipulation. Participants predicted significantly more intergenerational mobility ($p = .03$) and marginally more intragenerational mobility ($p = .09$) in the high-mobility condition than in the low-mobility condition (see Table 3). To examine whether perceptions of intra- and intergenerational mobility mediated the effect of condition on income inequality tolerance, we entered participants' predictions for intragenerational and intergenerational mobility into a bootstrapping multiple mediation analysis with condition as the independent variable and inequality tolerance as the dependent variable. Using 1,000 resamples yielded a significant indirect effect for intergenerational mobility predictions, $b = 0.029$, $SE = 0.016$, 95% CI [0.004, .066], but not for intragenerational mobility predictions, $b = 0.006$, $SE = 0.008$, 95% CI [-0.005, 0.032]. Thus, the effect of the mobility primes on inequality tolerance was mediated by participants' perceived prospect of upward mobility for their children. It is important to note that the prospect of upward mobility for an individual did not mediate the effect of condition assignment on income inequality tolerance. This negative effect could, of course, have several explanations, including the possibility that our particular manipulation was simply more effective at moving estimates of intergenerational mobility than intragenerational mobility. In general, though, this mediation result provides experimental support for Benabou and Ok's (2001) POUM hypothesis—with the caveat that individuals' support for inequality appears to be more powerfully swayed by their children's prospects than their own prospects.

Testing the “own efforts” hypothesis

Turning to the fairness mechanism, we examined whether mobility primes influenced inequality tolerance through views that individuals' economic station was the fruit of their own labor. To measure this construct, participants responded to the question, “To what degree do you think your current

economic station is the product of your own efforts versus external circumstances out of your control (e.g., the level you were born into, luck, etc.)?” on a number line from 0 (*due to other factors*) to 100 (*due to my own efforts*). Across conditions, people saw their economic station as slightly more the product of their own efforts than of external circumstances ($M = 56.77$, $SD = 30.30$), one-sample t -test comparing to the scale midpoint, $t(520) = 4.73$, $p < .001$. As a group, participants showed a self-serving bias whereby the higher their economic station, the more they felt it was because of their own efforts, $r(521) = .30$, $p < .001$ (see Supplemental Materials available online for more details).

Those who read the high-mobility article estimated more of their current station was the product of their efforts than of external circumstances than did those who read the low-mobility article (Table 3). The more participants saw their station as the product of their own efforts, the less intolerant they were of inequality, $r(521) = -.23$, $p < .001$. A 1,000 resample bootstrapping analysis yielded a significant indirect effect of effort estimation on inequality tolerance, mediating the effect of condition, $b = 0.034$, $SE = 0.019$, 95% CI [0.003, 0.083].

Finally, to investigate whether the POUM and own efforts hypotheses were independent factors in mediating the relationship between mobility perceptions and inequality attitudes, we entered all three variables—prospects of intergenerational mobility, prospects of intragenerational mobility, and the product of individuals’ own efforts measure—into a simultaneous mediation model (using Model 4 of Hayes’s 2013 PROCESS macro); we selected Model 4 as we had no reason to suspect a sequential ordering of our mediators, which is required by Model 6. A 1,000 resample bootstrapping analysis yielded significant indirect effects both for intergenerational mobility, $b = 0.024$, $SE = 0.014$, 95% CI [0.005, 0.064], and for the perception that individuals’ economic status is the product of their own efforts, $b = 0.031$, $SE = 0.017$, 95% CI [0.006, 0.074], but, again, not for intragenerational mobility, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.009$, 95% CI [-0.003, 0.034].

We should caution against overinterpreting the mediation analyses. Although our data are consistent with the proposed patterns of mediation for both the POUM hypothesis and the idea that tolerance for inequality is driven by the perception that individuals’ station is because of their own efforts, our data cannot rule out concerns of confounding mediators and outcomes (see Green, Ha, & Bullock, 2010) or potential confounds that were not measured, a limitation of many mediational analyses. We can say that experimentally shifting people’s perceptions to see higher levels of mobility leads people to perceive better prospects for their children, conclude that more of their economic station was earned, and report greater tolerance for inequality. These results complement the cross-national comparisons showing that, even after controlling for the actual level of inequality,

people in countries with high levels of mobility also have a higher tolerance for disparities between rich and poor.

It should be noted that these experimental data were solely focused on the United States and even the scope of the cross-national study was limited to Western countries because of data availability. Thus, questions of generalizability must be raised. Corneo and Grüner (2002), for instance, have reported that attitudes toward inequality and wealth redistribution follow different patterns in the formerly communist post-Soviet states than they do in Western countries, suggesting that our findings may not emerge consistently everywhere. Thus, future research should test how local or universal these current findings are.

Nevertheless, around the world, income inequality has rarely dominated the conversation as it currently does in both political and public debate. Much of this attention has been driven by the concern over deepening disparities between the richest citizens and the vast majority living with much less. The current results suggest that income mobility—or simply the perception of income mobility—can dull these concerns because people perceive the pathway to riches to be accessible and earned. Coupled with recent findings revealing gross overestimations of mobility (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015), the present results raise concerns that many populations may be accepting policies that reinforce inequality under the mistaken assumption that inequality is more transient and fair than it actually is. This is particularly problematic given research suggesting that rising levels of inequality have actually been reducing mobility (Corak, 2013; Mitnik, Cumberworth, & Grusky, 2016). All the same, our discussion here underscores the persistent appeal of stories reflecting the rags-to-riches triumph of the American Dream—tales that seduce people into justifying and even defending inequality under the perception, accurate or not, of a society that is mobile, hopeful, and fair.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at <http://pps.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>

Note

1. Variance Inflation Factors for all variables are below 4.00, suggesting no issues of multicollinearity (Kutner, Nachtsheim, & Neter, 2004).

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