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Everyday Conversations About Economic Inequality: A Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

High and rising levels of economic inequality come at a tremendous cost to societies, yet the public is often hesitant to confront these inequalities. Prior research has attempted to explain this paradox, pointing to how it is driven by individuals' misperceptions of the extent of inequality, broader narratives that justify inequality, and distrust in government intervention and redistribution. These beliefs and attitudes are not simply a reflection of individual predispositions; they are also a product of societal debates. The limited scholarship on such debates has focused on elite discourse, examining how discussions about inequality unfold among people in positions of power in formalized contexts such as parliaments or the media. Most of this research has been conducted in the Global North. We know very little about how ordinary people talk about economic inequality, especially in the Global South. Everyday conversations about economic inequality deserve more scholarly attention because of their distinct form and extensive range, covering diverse voices and social situations. They reflect how societies struggle with economic inequality and how some groups are silenced, while others have their voices amplified. Finally, conversations may affect opinion formation differently than unidirectional exposure to information. This article reviews the literature and sets out a research agenda to comprehensively study how ordinary people talk about economic inequality in various contexts.

1 | Introduction

Economic resources are unequally distributed across the world and within societies (Bourguignon and Morrisson 2002; Kanbur, Ortiz-Juarez, and Sumner 2024; Milanovic 2016). High levels of economic inequality have detrimental consequences for individuals and societies, such as higher rates of violence, poorer health, and lower levels of social mobility (e.g., Dabla-Norris et al. 2015; Neckerman and Torche 2007; Stiglitz 2016; Therborn 2014). However, economic inequality continues to increase in many contexts (Alvaredo et al. 2017; Gastwirth and Shi 2022). Part of the reason for the unbridled growth of inequality is the ambiguous attitudes of affluent individuals toward redistribution policies, particularly taxation, and their influence on political institutions and decision-making (Cagé and Piketty 2023; Gilens and Page 2014; López et al. 2022; Schakel 2021; Shapiro 2002). Yet, in many countries, even the general public shows minimal support for redistributive policies (Breznau and Hommerich 2019; Hoy and Mager 2021; McCall 2013; see also Lupu and Pontusson 2023). Why do people not challenge

economic inequality even when they stand to gain from redistribution and other government interventions?

Extant scholarship has pointed to three explanations. First, the public acceptance of economic inequalities may be driven by misperceptions. Scholars have documented that people often underestimate how poor or rich they are compared to others and the magnitude of inequality present in their societies, as well as its increase in recent decades (Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Kenworthy and McCall 2008; Kiatpongsan and Norton 2014; McCall 2013; Norton and Ariely 2011; Osberg and Smeeding 2006; Page and Goldstein 2016). They also show that people tend to overestimate the degree of social mobility in their society, conflate inequality of opportunity and outcomes (Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso 2018; Davidai and Gilovich 2018; Kraus 2015; Kraus and Tan 2015; Reynolds and Xian 2014), and derive perceptions of inequality from the relative political power of different ethnic or racial groups (Langer and Mikami 2013). Second, scholars point to the commonly held and strengthening belief in meritocracy, which resonates with neoliberal values around individual responsibility and market value (Mijs 2018b). These ideologies reframe economic inequality from a public issue to an individual one (McCall 2013; Mijs, Bakhtiari, and Lamont 2016). Third, researchers show that, across societies, large segments of the population oppose redistributive policies because they fear higher taxes, are distrustful of the quality of public services, and question the deservingness of welfare beneficiaries (Berens and von Schiller 2017; Castañeda, Doyle, and Schwartz 2020; Trump 2020). Distrustful and wary of the state, people strive to evade it rather than demand redistribution (for evidence from the Global South, see Holland 2017; Hydén 1980).

Public opinion does not take shape in a vacuum, nor does it simply reflect individual predispositions or existing levels of economic inequality within society (Bottero 2007, 2019; Mijs 2018a). Beliefs and attitudes are formed in social interactions—conversations, discussions, and debates (van Dijk 1997; Summers et al. 2022). Research on discourses around economic inequality has focused almost exclusively on how elites communicate about economic inequality via policy proposals and party programs (e.g., Weber 2020; see also van Dijk 1993) and how it is discussed in mainstream media (for a review, see Grisold and Theine 2020; Vaughan et al. 2024). A handful of studies that have considered how ordinary people talk among themselves about economic inequality have studied it in deliberative forums (Heuer et al. 2020; Zimmermann, Heuer, and Mau 2018), school classrooms (Robinson 2024; Teeger 2024), or focus groups (Summers et al. 2022; Valentine and Harris 2014). We know much less about where, when, how, and to what effect ordinary citizens organically talk about economic inequality and related topics, such as mobility, opportunity, wealth, and poverty in everyday situations.

In what follows, we present everyday conversations among ordinary citizens as a key piece of the puzzle explaining why people have not rallied against economic inequality. We argue that such conversations are distinct from elite discourse as they emerge spontaneously, are highly interactive and dynamic, and often occur in private or semi-public spaces (see also Hughey 2011; Myers and Williamson 2001; Sasson 1995; Schmitt-Beck and Schnaudt 2023). We begin by discussing what we have learned from research on public and media debates about inequality before considering what we *can* learn from conversations among ordinary people. Drawing on a handful of empirical studies on this topic, we outline areas for future research.

2 | Public and Media Debates About Economic Inequality

Existing scholarship tends to focus on debates on economic inequality in the public sphere. Guided by the assumption that public debates shape public opinion (Entman 1993; McCombs and Shaw 1972), scholars have investigated how powerful actors frame economic inequality. Such studies examine when and how an unequal distribution of resources is problematized or legitimized and whether such issues even enter the public debate as a subject worthy of discussion.

Research—mostly from the Global North—has produced three core insights into how political parties, both inside and outside parliament, discuss economic inequality. First, in their manifestos, parties across many democratic states have thematized economic issues and cleavages less than other social divisions (e.g., around immigration) over the past decades (Pastor Mayo 2023; Hooghe and Marks 2018). With growing inequality, right-wing parties have been trying to move their attention from questions of economic interests and redistribution—core issues of the left—to more value-based issues (Tavits and Potter 2015). Moreover, the declining salience of economic issues and the alignment of party positions in that regard have reduced support for redistribution, particularly among lower-income groups (Pastor Mayo 2023).

Second, in terms of policies related to inequality, the political interests of the affluent are better represented than those of the poor. In their campaigning, parties try to mobilize voters across the socioeconomic spectrum, aim to persuade the 'median voter' (Black 1948), and draw on populist appeals to the 'people.' However, when it comes to taxation of higher income, inheritance, and multinational corporations, research across Europe and the United States has shown that policy proposals and policies tend to reflect the preferences of affluent individuals and economically powerful interest groups (Emmenegger and Marx 2019; Pastor Mayo 2023; Weber 2020; Wright and Rigby 2020). In contrast, the demands of groups marginalized along the lines of class, gender, race, and ethnicity often receive less attention. This can result in a lower politicization of group interests as research has shown in various contexts in the Global North (e.g., Weber 2020) and the Global South (e.g., Seekings and Nattrass 2015).

Third, scholars have identified the narratives politicians use to delegitimize social policy (Kuhlmann and Blum 2022). Critical stances on welfare and redistribution policies usually frame beneficiaries as undeserving, allegedly as a result of their, being unwilling to work or pursue education, not being part of a national collective, or expressing moral flaws more generally (e.g., Esmark and Schoop 2017). Moreover, politicians tend to emphasize how welfare and redistributive policies negatively

affect economic growth (e.g., Smith Ochoa 2020; Smith Ochoa and Yildiz 2022). Although there are exceptions (e.g., Ross 2000; Rauscher and Schäfer 2022), it is clear that economic inequalities are not typically included among the most salient topics of political agendas. While attention has been paid to inequalities between ethnic groups or regions across the Global South (Stewart 2001; Boone 2024), it is less clear how these inequalities have been represented in public discourse.

These findings from the political realm are largely mirrored in research on media coverage of economic inequality and related phenomena, such as poverty, excessive wealth, and redistributive policies. In a recent systematic review of research on media debates around economic inequality, Vaughan et al. (2024) highlighted the paucity of systematic evidence, yet summarized a few key lessons. First, although actual economic inequality has increased in many countries in recent decades, scholars have not found a similar increase in media attention on this topic (McCall 2013; McGovern, Obradović, and Bauer 2023). Second, economic inequality is often treated as an issue of concern, particularly regarding the erosion of social cohesion and trust in the democratic system (Bank 2017; Smith Ochoa 2020). Nevertheless, media coverage tends to justify economic inequality and makes it seem inevitable by using tropes of meritocracy and foregrounding the importance of incentive structures for economic growth and innovation (Grisold and Silke 2020). Redistribution and the recipients of social welfare are portrayed in negative terms (Bell and Entman 2011; Dammerer, Hubmann, and Theine 2023; Epp and Jennings 2021), whereas economic elites face minimal criticism and are often celebrated (Waitkus and Wallaschek 2022). Third, the political orientation and ownership structure of media outlets matter for how these issues are reported (Guardino 2019; Thomas 2020). Finally, exposure to these debates can change individuals' perceptions of inequality and redistribution (Epp and Jennings 2021; though these media effects are constrained by prior beliefs and attitudes, see below).

3 | Everyday Conversations Among Ordinary People

Everyday conversations are part of the same overall sociopolitical and cultural context as political and media debates, yet we argue that they are distinct phenomena in two ways. First, conversation is a distinct form of communication. Conversations are usually informal and 'without manifest goals, unstructured, spontaneous, and free-flowing' (Schmitt-Beck and Lup 2013). Communication partners usually know who they are addressing, and their conversations are guided by norms, rules, and motivations that manage their social relationships (Ekström 2016; Emirbayer and Maynard 2011; Schmitt-Beck and Neumann 2023). However, people usually do not enter into a conversation with a specific strategic aim or a clear expectation of the content, length, and course of the conversation. Moreover, conversations are highly interactive: people take turns speaking and listening, and they reply to and argue with each other. These features of everyday conversations become especially clear in comparison to parliamentary debates and exposure to mainstream media discussions and advertisements.[1]

Second, most everyday conversations regarding inequality occur among ordinary people. In the context of our research interest, people can be considered 'ordinary' if they are *not* part of an elite that possesses substantial amounts of wealth, political influence, or communicative resources—stemming from being, for instance, the chairperson of a major corporation, a member of parliament, or a newspaper editor-in-chief (Bermeo 2003; Lamont and Mizrachi 2013). In addition, we do not consider someone as 'ordinary' if their occupation involves a markedly higher involvement with the topic, be it a social scientist studying inequality, a labor union organizer, or a political campaigner. Elites and experts also have everyday conversations about economic inequality; however, their conversations are likely to unfold in different ways than most everyday conversations in which participants are less likely to 'have fully informed preferences' on the topic (Chappell 2012, 47), are not be in the top 10% or 1% of the wealth or income distribution, and have more limited means to change policy (see also Sachweh 2012; Valentine and Harris 2014).

Conversations among ordinary people provide a new window to the shared cultural repertoires of arguments around economic inequality, which can help explain why the public does not challenge the status quo. People's conversations are shaped by the low prevalence of economic inequality in politics and media, the overrepresentation of elite perspectives, and the meritocratic frames that build legitimization. Owing to their unique character, studying everyday conversations promises to provide insights into how societies struggle with high and rising inequalities above and beyond public discourses in the media and politics in four distinct ways.

First, debates in the media and politics inform ordinary people's conversations, yet they do not determine them. The media agenda influences what people talk about, yet has only limited effects on beliefs and attitudes (Moy, Tewksbury, and Rinke 2016). Individuals select media that is likely to resonate with their pre-existing opinions, reinterpret what they read and see, and actively and selectively construct their identities from it (Knobloch-Westerwick 2015). This active 'meaning-making' also occurs in conversations and social settings (Hefner 2012; Strelitz 2005).

Second, due to the informal nature and the absence of expert knowledge, the conversations promise to offer a less scripted, yet richly textured, understanding of inequality. People may be cautious and even hesitant when they enter a conversation about a highly emotive topic, such as inequality, as it runs the risk of interpersonal conflict. However, once they engage in it, they are likely to express their subjective notions, situate their opinions in their personal experiences, frame the issue in episodes of their lives, and lean toward moral reasoning (Irwin 2018; Burns et al. 2024). Moreover, people may discuss wealth and income using their peers and immediate surroundings as points of reference rather than the national distribution and population means.

Third, owing to the highly interactive nature of these conversations, we can learn which arguments become more and less salient as conversations unfold and how interlocutors shift perspectives over time or hold steadfast onto their original

positions. The interactional nature of such conversations reveals aspects of deliberation that go beyond the kind of information that can be gleaned from surveys or interviews.

Finally, studying these conversations is important as they may also change public opinion. Inequality beliefs are far from fixed. In fact, studies indicate that individuals can alter their beliefs regarding redistribution and welfare upon exposure to information about their position in the income distribution or characteristics of welfare recipients (Balietti et al. 2021; Mijs and Hoy 2021; Petersen et al. 2011). Scholarship in the tradition of deliberative democracies has long stressed that conversations can lead to the validation, formation, and change of opinions (Gastil, Black, and Moscovitz 2008; Schmitt-Beck 2022b). Individuals learn about new arguments and information in situationally embedded social interactions and must justify their standpoints to others (Zimmermann, Heuer, and Mau 2018). Discussing inequality in everyday conversations, ordinary people may activate, amplify, or defuse attitudes and emotions related to economic inequality in complex ways; be it an acknowledgment of the problem and feelings of self-efficacy or an interpretation that makes the issue seem natural and unavoidable, thus fostering apathy. As such, conversations may not only reinforce the influence of elite talk about economic inequality on the thinking and feelings of ordinary citizens, but may also alter the effects of participants' exposure to elite messages (see Hefner 2012).

To date, scholars have examined everyday conversations about race (Myers and Williamson 2001; Sue and Golash-Boza 2013; Whitehead 2009, 2020), crime (Caldeira 2000; Sasson 1995; Teeger 2014), and politics (e.g., Gärtner, Wuttke, and Schoen 2021; Gastil, Black, and Moscovitz 2008), focusing on how they reveal the mechanisms through which people reconcile contradictory viewpoints. However, only a handful of studies have considered everyday conversations regarding economic inequalities. From these studies, we learned that participation in organized public talks can shape ordinary people's welfare attitudes (Heuer et al. 2020; Zimmermann, Heuer, and Mau 2018). After receiving information about the welfare state, participants engaged in discussions and subsequently shifted their attitudes toward more support for the redistribution of wealth as they learned about, reasoned with, and considered others' viewpoints. Similarly, findings from a pilot study by Summers et al. (2022) suggest that perceptions of inequality are (re)shaped in social interactions (see also Hecht, Burchardt, and Davis 2022). Their article provides a methodological blueprint and a proof-of-concept-study for highly structured, 'deliberative,' focus group interviews, which could mimic the situations in which people process information about inequality and form their beliefs. In an online experiment, Balietti et al. (2021) exposed participants to essays in favor of redistributive measures written by other lay people and randomly manipulated the political and non-political similarities between the participant and the author of the essay. They found that support for redistribution of wealth increased, particularly when the characteristics matched. Finally, Beckert and Arndt (2017) analyzed the comment sections of two major newspapers to understand how proponents and opponents of an inheritance tax justified their position. These discussions shared the same normative reference points (e.g., meritocracy) as communication by lobbying groups and experts; yet differed in that they did not consider the implications for companies and corporations.

4 | Methodological Approaches

Scholars have used various methods to study how ordinary people talk about social issues (Conover and Searing 2005). In general population surveys, scholars have asked respondents how often, with whom, and where people discuss politics and whether they enjoy it (e.g., Schmitt-Beck and Neumann 2023; Nir 2012). Similar information can be obtained in qualitative interviews, which simultaneously provide conversational data between the researcher and participant (e.g., Ekström 2016). Focus group discussions provide conversational data of a larger group of participants who debate social issues under the loose guidance of a researcher (e.g., Summers et al. 2022; Hecht, Burchardt, and Davis 2022). Ethnomethodological methods also allow one to observe conversations among research subjects; however, these discussions occur in natural settings in which the researcher is embedded (Emirbayer and Maynard 2011). In social media (e.g., Marchal 2022) and more traditional formats, such as letters to the editor (e.g., Conover and Searing 2005), researchers can observe naturally occurring conversations from a more distant observer position. Ethnographies and participant observation can enable a researcher to observe how moral judgments and cultural frames shape and reinforce social inequalities in 'natural' settings (Tošic and Streinzer 2022). Finally, experiments have been used to bring together people from opposing ideological spectrums to talk about politics and expose participants to a mock conversation to demonstrate the effects on beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (e.g., Balietti et al. 2021; Joyce and Harwood 2014).

All these methods have limitations and disadvantages. First, standardized surveys do not provide actual conversational data, and self-reports are prone to distorted recall of information, wishful self-perception, and social desirability bias. Particularly for a multifaceted topic such as economic inequality, it will be difficult for people to recount how often and under which circumstances they have talked about it. Second, qualitative interviews and focus group interviews provide actual conversation data; however, they cannot be implemented in numbers that allow for quantitative modeling. Moreover, conversations are induced and guided by the researchers (who are even the sole conversation partners in the case of qualitative interviews; Barbour and Morgan 2017). Third, ethnomethodological methods are difficult to scale up because they depend on the natural occurrence of the topic when the researcher is present, such as at a dinner table or in a hairdresser's salon. Moreover, they demand a trustful relationship between researchers and participants, and it can be difficult to record the actual conversation without interfering with the situation. Fourth, social media debates are predetermined by platform affordances regarding a user base (which may be biased toward certain demographics) and mode of communication (which may restrict the conversation to text only; Heft et al. 2023). Fifth, ethnographies are context bound and demanding in terms of researcher involvement in the field. Sixth, high-powered experiments are prohibitively expensive when they include real

participants (rather than exposing individuals to mock conversations) and are limited to the specific manipulation of the conversation in an artificial setting.

Scholars should combine these methods to strike a delicate balance between internal and external validity. Various combinations are possible for a mixed-method design. We deem sequential approaches to be the most fruitful. Consider the following examples. First, naturally occurring conversations can be inductively investigated on social media or through participant observation. In step two, a more deductive approach can be taken in more structured settings, such as a focus group or experiment in which the researchers give prompts or manipulate contextual factors, drawing on the insights generated in the first step. Alternatively, researchers can start by generating conversational data in more artificial settings such as a focus group discussions, and then, in the second step, assess their external validity by studying naturally occurring conversations.

Beyond mixed-method designs, scholars should explore new data sources and methods to generate conversational data. The affordances of some social media platforms make them more suitable for discussions among ordinary people. For example, Reddit promotes responsivity, is purely text-based, and does not emphasize the identity, status, or social network of largely anonymous conversation partners. Due to the sheer amount of communication, social media platforms also allow scholars to venture beyond traditional types of analyses (e.g., ethnomethodological conversation analysis, manual thematic coding, and discourse analysis) and apply computational text analysis. For example, topic modeling can map the thematic contexts of inequality debates, and network analysis can visualize multiplex and sequential patterns of arguments. Finally, researchers may find innovative ways to generate dialogic data that are closer to naturally occurring conversations yet allow for some generalization. For example, passers-by in malls could be invited to have short dialogs guided by subtle standardized prompts by the researcher. The features of the conversations could be manually coded and regressed on the characteristics of the conversation partners.

5 | Toward a Research Agenda

Building on our reading of the literature, we propose a research agenda for studying ordinary people's conversations about economic inequality that focuses on (1) the nature of conversations on economic inequality; (2) the antecedents of these conversations at the (a) individual, (b) situational, and (c) country levels; and (3) the consequences of such conversations.

5.1 | The Nature of Everyday Conversations

Scholars have investigated conversations about social issues in sociology, political science, and communication research using a variety of approaches. Some have analyzed the entire conversation as a single unit of analysis, asking questions such as who is talking about politics with whom and where (e.g., Bennett, Flickinger, and Rhine 2000; Schmitt-Beck and Schnaudt 2023). Other approaches start with ethnomethodological conversation analysis to describe what happens within conversations (Emirbayer and Maynard 2011; Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008; Sidnell and Stivers 2012), focusing on questions such as: How do people respond to each other? When do they take turns? Scholars vary in the emphasis placed on nonverbal layers of communication, meta-perceptions of what is said, and the cognitive and affective states that accompany the exchange of arguments (e.g., arousal, affect). Drawing on this literature, we consider the following three sets of questions the most pressing for investigating conversations about economic inequality.

First, given the dearth of studies on the subject, general descriptive mapping would be a logical starting point. Such a mapping would consider the following questions: How commonly do people talk about economic inequality in their everyday conversations? When discussing economic inequality, do they focus on inequality between individuals or groups? Do they focus on income or wealth? Do they explicitly refer to distributions or do they focus on excessive wealth, consumption disparities, poverty, relative deprivation, or related phenomena? How do they link economic inequalities to other inequalities? What are the contexts in which these conversations emerge? What arguments do people make?

Second, it is important to understand how conversations unfold. This means engaging with questions such as: Do people respond to certain problematizations of inequality in prototypical ways? Are there arguments or frames that are either universally accepted or, on the contrary, always met with disagreement? Exchanges may follow the same repetitive sequences in which, for example, a problematization of income inequality is answered with downward comparisons or 'whataboutism' (cf. Bowell 2023; McMullen 2021). Such patterns would indicate shared argumentative and cultural repertoires that naturalize economic inequality and foster political apathy.

Third, inequality is a highly emotive topic that can go hand in hand with affective evaluations and feelings, such as anger, guilt, despair, jealousy, disengagement, and boredom (Bonilla-Silva 2019; Teeger 2015, 2023; Wilkins 2012; Wingfield 2007). Scholars interested in everyday conversations about economic inequality would do well to examine more closely the role of emotions as a constitutive feature of these interactions. Since social norms govern everyday conversations less rigidly, it is likely that these conversations will contain traces of emotive expression, which we expect will influence the course of the conversation. For example, the interactions between 'maids' and 'madams' in South Africa have been shown to include strategic silences due to feelings of guilt or inferiority (Murray and Durrheim 2018).

5.2 | Individual and Situational Antecedents

How a conversation on economic inequality unfolds depends largely on who participates in it (e.g., Ekström 2016; Gerber et al. 2012; Hibbing, Ritchie, and Anderson 2011; Schmitt-Beck and Neumann 2023). On the one hand, people contribute

differently to conversations depending on individual characteristics, ranging from topic-specific perceptions and interpretations to more general factors, such as personality traits, cultural norms, socio-demographics, or moods. On the other hand, people contribute differently depending on the persons to whom they are talking.

Prior research has shown that beliefs and attitudes about economic inequality are reflective of people's socioeconomic positions, such as their level of income, wealth, education, and experiences of social mobility and relative deprivation (Isbell 2022; Mijs et al. 2022; Wilson et al. 2022). Moreover, perceptions and interpretations of economic inequality vary between social groups (e.g., race, gender, age) and ideological camps (for a review, see Mijs 2018a). Different beliefs and attitudes translate into different types of contributions to everyday conversations regarding inequality. That is not to say the relationship between beliefs and conversational input and participation needs to be direct and straightforward (Schmitt-Beck 2022b). For example, women have a distinct perspective on economic inequality, yet are, on average, less likely to participate in political discussions (Nir 2012; Nir and McClurg 2015); hence, their perspective may be underrepresented in conversations around the topic. In this regard, it is important to note that social identities overlap in intersectional ways: membership in multiple oppressed, marginalized, or stigmatized groups creates unique positionalities that will not only affect perceptions of economic inequality in a particular way, but also the likelihood of entering a conversation on the topic (Collins 2019; Hochschild 1996).

How individual-level attributes influence conversations should be studied in the particular social context in which the conversation unfolds. The first factor to consider is the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the conversation partners (Balietti et al. 2021; Mijs 2018a; Summers et al. 2022) to study how conversations are shaped by whether participants come—or are perceived to come—from a similar socioeconomic background, gender, racialized group, or political camp. For example, participants from lower socioeconomic strata or marginalized groups may feel less willing to voice their opinions when talking to someone from a more privileged socioeconomic group. In turn, the latter may be reluctant to bring up economic inequality (e.g., Andersen, Lue Kessing, and Østergaard 2021; Thornton 2023). Research on domestic workers and their employers in South Africa shows that in interactions across vast socioeconomic boundaries, inequalities tend to be left invisible or develop into 'everyday dehumanization' (Murray, Durrheim, and Dixon 2022; Murray and Durrheim 2018). In other contexts, more heterogeneity may lead to exposure to more diverse arguments or disagreement, and thus to participants either learning from or leaving the conversation.

A final set of questions concerns the context in which the conversation occurred, as well as the relationships between the people participating in it. Compare a family dinner with the in-laws to a water cooler conversation at work, a picnic with close friends, or a conversation between farmer laborers in the field or among unemployed people waiting on the roadside for day labor. In some of these settings, people are more likely to broach political topics, express disagreement, or share sensitive information (e.g., their income; see also Schmitt-Beck and Grill 2020; Morey, Eveland, and Hutchens 2012). Some settings engage everyone present, while others create a private conversation within a broader social situation. In all settings, people manage their relationships during the conversations. The extent to which these differences affect conversations about economic inequality remains an open question. For example, political disagreement is often perceived as socially inappropriate, especially with conversation partners one does not know (Schmitt-Beck and Schnaudt 2023). At the same time, being close will not always result in more openness about perceptions of inequality or political views. People may avoid the topic or choose not to disclose their real opinions with someone they know well if there is a status difference, dependencies are involved, or a business relationship is at stake. Here, one might think of a range of conversation partners, such as a homeowner and their domestic worker, work colleagues, spouses, or parents and their children. Similarly, revealing one's economic resources to a friend may invite unwanted notions of inferiority and status loss (Cullen and Perez-Truglia 2023; Edwards 2005).

5.3 | Country-Level Antecedents

Studies have found that attitudes toward economic inequality and redistribution also vary across nations (Cavaillé 2023; Isbell 2022; Jaeger 2009; Svallfors 1997; Hoy and Mager 2021). These studies have partially explained these variations by differences in the objective levels of inequality and histories of redistribution in different countries. At the same time, research suggests that broader cultural repertoires and national narratives also play a role in determining people's attitudes toward economic inequality; for example, if distributional measures and welfare policies are seen as fair and justified (Heuer et al. 2020; Kelley and Zagorski 2004; Mau 2004). The same features that shape the visibility and salience of economic inequality also likely have an impact on conversations among ordinary people in terms of both the frequency with which the topic is discussed and the nature of the conversation.

Research has shown cross-national variation in people's willingness to discuss issues around race and racism that are related to national myths (Lamont et al. 2016). Similarly, in countries where inequality is perceived as a fair outcome of entrepreneurship and effort, we might expect conversations about inequality to be framed in partisan terms and evoke tension between participants (see also Bartels 2016). In countries where public discourse frames inequality as a result of histories of colonialism, oppression, and slavery, such as Brazil and South Africa, there might be more consensus about the need to address these legacies but also resistance to focusing on the past (see Teeger 2024). Finally, in countries where socioeconomic structuring has not occurred primarily along (post)colonial markers of race, such as Botswana or Germany, discussions of inequality might center more prominently on other axes of difference, such as immigration status or gender.

In examining the intersectional ways in which economic inequality is framed and debated, we encourage researchers to foreground perspectives from the Global South. Due to the

South and North's place in the history of (post)colonial capitalism and experience with globalized neoliberalism, culturally shared repertoires may fundamentally differ (Milanovic 2016; Seekings 2008; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). As a result of this history, countries in the Global South and Global North have been positioned differently with regard to the global income and wealth ladder. For people from the Global North and South, comparisons to global averages bring about a different perspective vis-à-vis their own economic status, that of their social groups, and the country in which they live. In other words, inequalities take a different scale and meaning depending on the reference group. Attending to how people in various parts of the world construct such comparisons opens new avenues for important cross-national research.

Finally, in countries in which the distributions of wealth and income are historically tied to membership in racialized or ethnic groups, social identities may be more salient in the public discourse around economic inequality. However, the salience of social inequalities may affect talk in opposing ways. On the one hand, the social identity dimension can divert attention from economic resources to questions of representation and participation. On the other hand, social identity dynamics may make it easier to mobilize people against inequality by appealing to their group membership (see also, B. Klandermans and Stekelenburg 2020; P. G. Klandermans 2013; van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2012).

5.4 | The Consequences of Everyday Conversations About Economic Inequality

Conversations not only provide a new way of *capturing* public sentiments but also offer insight into the forces that *shape* such views. At the individual level, conversations may trigger processes of belief activation, attitude formation, and change (Balietti et al. 2021; Heuer et al. 2020; Zimmermann, Heuer, and Mau 2018). These may subsequently influence behaviors in the form of attention given to news on the topic, political participation, activism, and so on. On a situational level, conversational experience may influence whether the conversation partners will revisit or avoid the subject in the future either among themselves or with other conversation partners (see also Schieferdecker 2021). At the aggregate level, a large number of conversations among a sufficiently large number of people may reshape the public and political agenda (see also, Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004; Schmitt-Beck and Grill 2020).

Given the dearth of research on this topic, we believe that it is especially fruitful to gather more evidence on the relationship between conversations, beliefs, and attitudes about the causes, consequences, and potential remedies for economic inequality. Research on persuasion and communication effects has unearthed various conditions of messaging that could help us to understand when conversations may lead to opinion change on the individual level—for example, cognitive involvement, perceptions of the general and topic-specific credibility of the conversation partner, and prior beliefs and attitudes around the topic (Humă, Stokoe, and Sikveland 2020; Perloff 2010; Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

That said, conversations differ from mere exposure to messages, as conversation partners are compelled to respond and position themselves vis-à-vis what is said by expressing agreement, disagreement, amendment, or changing the topic. Given these conversational dynamics, the nature and order of the arguments warrant special attention. If a person uses a certain frame to problematize inequality, conversation partners must draw on the repertoire of culturally shared arguments and respond with a certain counter-frame. As such, conversation partners are exposed to and engage in a sequence of arguments that may have different effects. For example, a reference to local inequalities may be relativized with a reference to (more pronounced) global levels of inequality, and the impact of such a reference may differ from exposure to messages that are either about local inequality or global inequalities. To the degree that we can find universal sequences of arguments that problematize or justify inequality, there may be general patterns of effect across individuals and conversations.

5.5 | Analytical Complexities

Conversations are highly complex social interactions that comprise a multitude of communicative behaviors and perceptions at different levels. This complexity is amplified by difficult questions of causality. To start, some factors that may influence conversations are related to each other, such as education and political interest (Schmitt-Beck 2022a; Schmitt-Beck and Schnaudt 2023). Some factors are nested within each other. For example, what people with a certain socioeconomic status will say in a conversation may depend on the participants in the conversation, and the effects of socioeconomic status and the participants in the conversation may differ if the conversation happens in a neighborhood with an average socioeconomic profile rather than in a significantly more or less affluent part of town. Moreover, ordinary people will not abide by expert definitions of 'economic inequality' (e.g., Atkinson 1983; Sen 1997) but will have different understandings of what constitutes wealth, affluence, and poverty, and these understandings will likely vary between societies. These complexities increase the burden of comparative research (see, e.g., the African concept of 'wealth-in-people'; Kusimba 2020). Finally, the same characteristics that influence the *nature* of a conversation may also condition the *effects* of the conversation. As mentioned before, the fact that women are, on average, less likely to enter into political conversation (Nir 2012) means that they will have different things to say about inequality, relate differently to certain arguments, and may thus be differently affected by the conversations. These complexities call for carefully crafted research designs and multilevel analyses.

Beyond these difficult causal questions, we must acknowledge that everyday conversations are a research topic that spans the social sciences and humanities. For this article, we have drawn from a wide array of literature from sociology, communication, social psychology, and political science. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the disciplinary blind spots. Linguistics and speech communication have much to offer regarding the rules that govern communication at a more fundamental level, as well as about conversations that are not primarily concerned with social

issues. Similarly, we acknowledge the valuable nature of anthropological accounts of how inequalities are perceived and discussed across many contexts in the Global South, which we have not attended to in this article. We hope that future scholarship will help to bridge these disciplinary boundaries.

6 | Conclusion

In this article, we have argued for the importance of understanding how ordinary people engage in everyday conversations about economic inequality. We view these conversations as reflective of how societies grapple with the high and growing levels of economic inequality. Moreover, conversations about economic inequality may have the power to activate, amplify, or defuse beliefs and emotions in complex ways. As such, conversations may lead to the recognition of the problem of economic inequality and feelings of self-efficacy, or alternatively, they can make economic inequality seem natural and inevitable, fostering apathy.

We invite scholars to consider everyday conversations as a window into how societies cope with and make sense of economic inequality, which may take a different form from elite debates in the mass media and politics. We have outlined a research agenda, at the core of which is a mapping of the nature, conditions, and impact of everyday conversations about inequality. Several themes stand out: the role of socioeconomic status and social group identities and their intersectionality, the importance of considering the experiences of marginalized groups and perspectives from the Global South, and the relevance of the interactional dimension of the conversation. Clearly, researchers face a trade-off between observing 'organic' conversations as embedded in everyday life and an aspiration to generalize findings across situational and national contexts. We believe that mixed-method designs and new data analytical tools will help us develop a more comprehensive understanding of everyday conversations and, as such, provide a new piece to the puzzle of why the public perceives high levels of inequality as undesirable but rarely mobilizes to change the unequal status quo.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] Notably, these features are not limited to face-to-face interactions, but extend to various technologically mediated settings such as text messaging, online forums, and chat rooms.

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