

Santiago, 21.01.2025

Dear Editors,

We are pleased to resubmit our manuscript, titled “Changes in the justification of educational inequalities. The role of perceptions of inequality and meritocracy during the COVID pandemic” for consideration in Social Justice Research. We are grateful for the insightful and constructive feedback provided by the reviewers, which has greatly enhanced the clarity and robustness of our work.

Attending to the reviewers comments, we have streamlined the introduction to eliminate excessive conceptual details and better integrate the key concepts leading to our hypotheses. This revision provides a more focused and logical progression, ensuring the hypotheses are clearly aligned with the theoretical framework. To address the challenge of disentangling the effects of Chile’s social protests, the constitutional reform process, and the COVID-19 pandemic, we have incorporated data from an additional panel wave conducted in 2023 and that became available during the reviews. This analysis includes COVID-specific indicators, allowing for a nuanced analysis of overlapping macro-level events. While we appreciate the suggestion to focus on cross-sectional data, we maintain that the longitudinal component remains a critical strength of this study. We demonstrate how the inclusion of the 2023 wave enhances our ability to track temporal patterns and distinguish the impacts of different societal disruptions. These longitudinal insights advance theoretical debates and provide a richer understanding of educational inequalities in the Chilean context. In the next pages, we address each comments of the editors and the reviewers.

We believe these revisions strengthen the manuscript and align it more closely with the goals of Social Justice Research and the special issue. We are confident that the updated manuscript offers valuable insights into the justification of educational inequalities during a period of significant societal change.

Thank you for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our work. We look forward to your feedback and remain available to address any further concerns.

Sincerely,

## Editors' comments

	Content of the Comment	Answer to the Comment
1.	Introduction and Literature Review: The manuscript comprehensively reviews the literature concerning meritocracy, inequality, and related concepts. However, we question the necessity and direct relevance of this extensive elaboration to the primary focus of the study, which should examine how belief systems—particularly in education—are likely influenced by societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or other local conditions.	This section was reorganized entirely and re-written in line with the reviewer's comments, emphasizing changes in inequality justification during the COVID pandemic and lowering the weight initially given to general beliefs about inequality.
2.	Both reviewers expressed concerns regarding the longitudinal approach, noting the absence of data to adequately assess how trends were impacted during the pandemic. Furthermore, the current version of the paper does not convincingly elucidate the longitudinal trend.	We tackled this comment with different approaches: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reinforcing the pandemic context in the Chilean case in the introduction</li> <li>- we added a new panel wave available after the first submission, having now two waves after the pandemic</li> <li>- we highlighted within-person time changes in the justification of educational inequalities</li> <li>- we included specific hypotheses related to pandemic related issues, considering two additional variables in the analysis.</li> </ul>
3.	We recommend shortening and clarifying this general overview of the field, referring to crucial terms. Instead, focus on elaborating on the theoretical and local conditions contributing to the fluctuations in educational inequality-related beliefs in the pre-and post-pandemic contexts. Given the constraints of available data, this more focused contribution remains significant while providing a clearer exploration of how crises affect beliefs related to inequality and justice.	The introduction was restructured to this end, emphasizing local conditions and factors related to the justification of inequality in education.
4.	This approach should also include a more informative description of the Chilean educational and political landscape. If available, please incorporate empirical evidence to substantiate this discussion. Additionally, the derived hypotheses may need to be revised to align with these adjustments.	We included additional antecedents about the Chilean case.
5.	Findings: Please ensure that each assumption is addressed throughout this section. On page 16, line 4, the results refer to Hypothesis 1; however, it is not explicitly stated there.	The models and analysis are now better aligned with the hypotheses.
6.	Given that Hypothesis 1 is particularly relevant to our special issue, consider integrating the time dimension when discussing the results of the interaction effects on page 19, lines 34–35. Specifically, address the four waves prior to the pandemic and the fifth wave subsequent to it.	To better assess the pandemic's contextual effect, we included additional variables specifically related to the health crises and analyzed additional interaction effects with these variables.
7.	Moreover, Table 1 lacks the number of participants (N) for each wave. This omission creates ambiguity regarding whether the reported frequencies correspond to N=8042 or another figure.	We add the N for each wave, and now we clarify the total number of subjects from a longitudinal perspective, as observations are nested in subjects in the longitudinal analysis.
8.	Conclusions and Discussion: The discussion section requires further elaboration, particularly	We re-elaborated the discussion and conclusions in this direction, adding possible interpretations to the link

	<p>regarding the strengths and limitations of the analyses presented. There is an opportunity to explore additional interpretations concerning the relationship between effort-based meritocracy and the justification of inequality in education within the post-COVID context (p. 21, lines 34–45).</p>	<p>between meritocratic perception and justification of educational inequality.</p>
9.	<p>As noted by Reviewer 2, the study's findings could also be viewed in light of the political upheaval in Chile, particularly following Boric's election in 2021, which posed challenges to the previously established democratic model.</p>	<p>The period under analysis includes the cycle of protests that occurred between 2019 and 2020. However, we argue that while these events may have influenced public opinion regarding the justification of educational inequality, several nuances should be considered. The protests were significantly interrupted due to COVID-related measures, including curfews and lockdowns. Additionally, public opinion surveys that have examined the periods before, during, and after the protests indicate that the attributable influence of the “social outburst” (which remains difficult to establish as causal) actually increased during the pandemic. We argue that this increase is primarily due to heightened risk exposure and vulnerability during the COVID crisis. We also mention in this version that highly contested political processes, as the two constitutional processes occurring during the pandemic, make it difficult to disentangle the effects tested in this research (as in other studies).</p>

## Reviewer 1

	Content of the Comment	Answer to the Comment
1	(This paper has strengths. The data appears to be of high quality, and the research question is relevant. However, the paper is hard to follow and never converges into a convincing cohesive paper. I was also not convinced that this data is relevant to study the effect of the pandemic.)	We restructured the introduction and the analysis in this regard, emphasizing changes in the justification of inequality and their link with the pandemic period.
2	The introduction meanders into too many historic details of each concept and doesn't sufficiently link the concepts together. The authors need to better guide the readers in the introduction towards the hypotheses. When one arrives at the hypotheses section, it should be obvious what the direction of the hypotheses is and how they fit together in the research project. It was not the case here.	We have revised the section to streamline the discussion of key concepts, removing unnecessary details. We now focus on the most relevant aspects of each concept, emphasizing their interconnections and how they lead to the study's hypotheses. Additionally, we have restructured the introduction to clearly outline the research gap and guide readers towards the hypotheses. We believe these changes ensure that the hypotheses are logically presented and well-integrated into the research project.
3	The main novelty of this paper is to study well-known relationships in the justification of inequality literature in the context of a pandemic. But I was not convinced that the authors could say anything about COVID with the data at hand. They do not have data from 2020 and 2021, only from 2022. The protests in Chile in 2019 could have also affected individuals' justification of inequalities.	In line with Editor's comment #2, we examined the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic context and preferences regarding educational inequality, by including two predictors from Wave 5 related to the sanitary crisis. The first is a measure of the relative importance of the economy over public health, based on agreement with the statement, "The economy is more important than health." The second is an indicator of welfare assistance, reflecting self-reported receipt of emergency supplies during the pandemic. Our findings reveal that both indicators are independently associated with the justification of educational inequality. Specifically, individuals prioritizing the economy over health are more likely to justify educational inequality, while welfare recipients are less likely to do so. This evidence suggests that these two COVID-related factors are linked to attitudes toward inequality independently of socioeconomic and normative attitudinal factors, such as income, political ideology, or perceptions of meritocracy.
4	There is an issue in how the authors formulate their H5. They suggest that COVID led to more structural barriers, which should lead to a higher perception of barriers, less belief in meritocracy, and less justification of inequalities. This is a mediation hypothesis, but the authors are testing it as a moderation hypothesis.	For a better estimation of the hypothesis related to the contextual effect of the pandemic, other related variables were included that were used in the interaction effects, such as whether state benefits were received during this period. All these results are discussed in relation to the hypotheses.
5	If one is not convinced that this data can speak to the effects of COVID, then the paper investigates only H2, H3, and H4, which are well-known relationships in the literature, but in the Chilean context. If this is the focus, the paper should be re-written in a more straightforward manner as most of the effects are well-known.	We are confident that the paper was rewritten more straightforwardly. We agree that there is abundant and growing studies in the area of meritocracy and inequality. Still, from our knowledge, no studies so far have addressed the justification of educational disparities in association with meritocratic perceptions, let alone from a longitudinal (within subjects) perspective. We hope that this contribution becomes clearer in this revised version.
6	While the system-justification theory initially suggested more justification among the lower-status, recent evidence does not support this claim anymore (e.g., Brandt, 2013).	When mentioning system justification in the paper is about a publication of 2024, which is linked to higher support for the principles of equity and equality (not lower status).

## Reviewer 2

### General comments

The article is titled "Changes in the Justification of Educational Inequalities: The Role of Perceptions of Inequality and Meritocracy during the COVID Pandemic" with a strong emphasis on its longitudinal approach. While most of the hypotheses are well-grounded and can be tested with the data used, the longitudinal design is relatively weak due to methodological concerns, particularly related to the data collection, timing, and case of study.

In conclusion, this article is highly engaging, well-constructed, and relevant to the special issue. Most of its hypotheses are of substantial academic interest and contribute significantly to the field of attitudes toward inequality, with a focus on education. Shifting the emphasis from a longitudinal to a cross-sectional approach would make the article more robust and less vulnerable to methodological criticisms, thereby strengthening its contribution to the discussion of educational justice in the post-COVID-19 era.

	Comment Content	Answer to the Comments
1	The authors use data from five waves: 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2022. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, by 2022, the pandemic was already in decline, and much of social and economic activity had returned to normal. This timing no longer represents the crisis period that the authors aim to examine theoretically.	We have included more background information on Chile's economic situation before, during, and after the COVID-19 crisis. At the same time, we have included relevant information on how the authorities handled the pandemic problem, as well as Chile's position relative to other countries on the continent in this regard.
2	<p>The extended gap between the penultimate and the final wave (2019 and 2022) poses a problem, especially given the Chilean context. As mentioned in the article's conclusion, between 2019 and 2022, Chile experienced significant political and social changes, such as massive social protests and a constitutional reform process. These events greatly complicate the attribution of observed changes to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>How can the effects of the Chilean protests, the constitutional process, and the pandemic be disentangled, considering that they all occurred between the 2019 and 2022 waves? Unfortunately, the 2021 wave of the survey used did not include the dependent variable of this article, which would have helped control for these longitudinal issues.</p>	Thank you for raising this important point about the challenge of disentangling the effects of the Chilean social protests, the constitutional process, and the COVID-19 pandemic between the 2019 and 2022 waves. To strengthen our analysis, we have incorporated data from an additional panel wave conducted in 2023. Besides, we included indicators specifically designed to capture the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing us to isolate its impact more effectively. While we acknowledge the limitations inherent in addressing overlapping macro-level events, these methodological enhancements represent a significant step forward in providing a more nuanced analysis of the observed changes.
3	Considering these methodological difficulties and the inability to measure what the article intends, I suggest discarding the longitudinal component and focusing on cross-sectional relationships, which are particularly interesting and contribute to the literature on social justice. By centering on the 2022 wave, the article could discuss the justification of educational inequalities in the post-COVID era, aligning with the theme of the special issue. Discussing changes associated with COVID-19 is unrealistic given the current data and methodological design, but the available variables allow for an insightful exploration of the relationship between perceptions of meritocracy, perceptions of economic inequality, and educational inequality justification.	<p>We appreciate your suggestion to focus on cross-sectional relationships using the 2022 wave and recognize the value of exploring educational inequalities in the post-COVID era. However, we respectfully counter that the longitudinal component remains a crucial strength of this study, as it allows us to trace changes over time and provides a unique contribution to the literature.</p> <p>While we acknowledge the methodological complexities of disentangling overlapping events (social protests, constitutional reform, and the pandemic), the addition of the 2023 panel wave with COVID-specific indicators enhances our capacity to address these issues. By examining shifts across multiple waves, we can identify longitudinal patterns and differentiate event-specific impacts. This temporal dimension is critical to understanding how justification of educational inequalities evolves in response to large-scale societal disruptions, rather than treating these changes as static phenomena.</p>

		<p>Furthermore, retaining the longitudinal component allows us to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Capture Dynamic Trends: Longitudinal data provide insights into the trajectory of attitudes and beliefs, revealing whether observed changes are short-lived (e.g., protest-driven) or sustained (e.g., COVID-induced).</li> <li>2. Control for Pre-Existing Differences: By analyzing data from multiple time points, we can control for baseline variations in attitudes from 2016, offering a more robust explanation of the post-pandemic context.</li> <li>3. Advance Theoretical Understanding: Longitudinal findings enrich theoretical debates on the justification of inequalities by demonstrating how macro-level events shape social justice attitudes over time.</li> </ol> <p>While cross-sectional analyses are undoubtedly valuable, they cannot fully address these dynamic questions. Thus, we believe that retaining the longitudinal component, supplemented by COVID-specific indicators and the new 2023 wave, aligns with the theme of the special issue while offering a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of educational inequalities in Chile.</p>
4	Further elaborating on why the dimension of perceived meritocracy towards effort is more relevant than the one concerning ability in explaining the justification of educational disparities, for instance, could be a valuable addition to a cross-sectional design, which the current version does not discuss in depth.	We discuss the distinction between effort and talent regarding the justification of inequality in education and we consider both aspects in the analysis; we think that is a promising area to go further, as we suggest in the conclusions. Still, we think that this is not contradictory to a longitudinal design.
5	Page 3, line 17: I suggest adding a reference to support the sentence.	Added Donoso (2016) and Reyes-Housholder and Roque (2019) who analyze the role and influence of the student movements in 2006 and 2011 and the feminist movement in 2018, respectively.
6	Page 3, line 45: Strengthen the rationale behind the assumption that the association between meritocratic perception and inequality justification would be weaker among lower-status groups. Include references.	We reordered the hypothesis and the arguments accordingly.
7	Page 5, line 39: The sentence "Studies in this matter have argued that perceived economic inequality functions as an anchor for the justifications of inequality because if these inequalities are indeed seen as fair in their generative processes, then they will be considered as just" is unclear. Are you referring to perceptions of inequalities? Why use the term "fair" when discussing perceptions rather than judgments? Are you referring to perceived large inequalities? This distinction between perceptions and judgments about inequality needs clarification.	This was confusing indeed, we clarify now that we refer to perceptions, not normative judgments.
8	Page 7, line 29: I suggest adding a reference to support the sentence.	That sentence was removed due to the restructuring of the argument.
9	Page 8: Has the relationship between perceptions of meritocracy and inequality justification been studied in the Chilean context? Adding a paragraph on the relevant literature in Chile could strengthen the gap this study aims to address.	We added evidence from Chile in this version when presenting the correspondent hypothesis.
10	Pages 9 and 10: I suggest removing H1 and H5. Also, you may consider adding a new hypothesis concerning differences in the effects between effort	With the new structure of the paper, we hope every hypothesis is now well justified. Regarding the difference between perceived effort and talent, we do not know

	and abilities in meritocratic perception, as it is already being tested through the analytical strategy.	previous evidence as a ground for a hypothesis regarding inequality justification. As in the results we observe indeed a difference, we think that proposing such a hypothesis now could be considered ad-hoc.
11	Page 12, line 29: Why control for subjective social status? Please explain the reason for this in the methods.	We briefly argued why subjective social status is considered in the method section. In this regard, it has been argued that perceived social status is a relevant predictor of attitudes toward economic inequality. In addition, subjective measures can complement objective measures in predicting life chances, which are connected to how individuals experience economic disparities. In this regard, it has been argued that how people form their views on their standing in society results from experiences with direct socioeconomic circumstances and social comparison processes with reference groups.
12	Page 12, line 30: "Age groups" instead of age.	Corrected.
13	Page 13, line 31: Remove "(NA)" from the variable's name.	The income quintile variable was changed to its continuous version, so the NA quintile was eliminated.
14	Page 16, line 12: In Figure 4, I suggest using two contrasting colors to better represent correlations, as some negative correlations appear weaker than positive ones, though they are not.	Change to red and blue colors
15	Page 18: In Table 2, I suggest removing all sociodemographic controls to avoid arbitrariness and focus on variables of interest. You can add a line "Sociodemographic controls: No/Yes" in Table 2 and include the complete table in the Annex.	Suggestion taken.
16	Page 19: In Table 3, I would name the models "Model 6," "Model 7," and "Model 8" to avoid confusion.	Suggestion taken.