

# Judgments of Responsibility for Inequality: A Framework and Review

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## Abstract

Decades of psychological research have led to a better understanding of the factors that influence people's causal explanations of inequalities, such as the racial wealth gap. But our understanding of the psychology of inequality remains limited because this research has largely focused on causal and retrospective judgments. In this article, we argue that two distinctions are valuable for clarifying judgments of responsibility for inequality: the moral-causal distinction and the retrospective-prospective distinction. The moral-causal distinction differentiates judgments of agents' blameworthiness and obligation (moral) from judgments of their contribution to an outcome (causal). The retrospective-prospective distinction differentiates judgments about the agents, actions, and conditions that led to historical or present inequalities (retrospective) from judgments about what agents can or should do to remedy existing inequalities and prevent them in the future (prospective). We summarize existing research on how sociocultural, emotional, motivational, and cognitive factors affect the four categories of judgments defined by this framework. In doing so, we identify important gaps and highlight directions for future research that will allow us to better explain, predict, and shape judgments relating to inequality.

## Keywords

attribution, causal reasoning, moral reasoning, responsibility, inequality

Who or what is responsible for inequality? To make answering this question more tractable, consider a specific inequality: the wealth gap between White and Black Americans, which is approximately 4:1 as of 2022 (i.e., Black families own \$0.25 for every \$1 that White families own; Aladangady et al., 2022). Who or what is responsible for this race-based gap in wealth? Some answers might come to mind, including structural factors (such as redlining and predatory lending; Kluegel & Bobo, 1993; Lui, 2006; Vasilyeva & Lombrozo, 2020), individual factors (such as work ethic and priorities; Carian & Johnson, 2022; Schuman, 1997), or combinations of the two (Peretz-Lange et al., 2021).

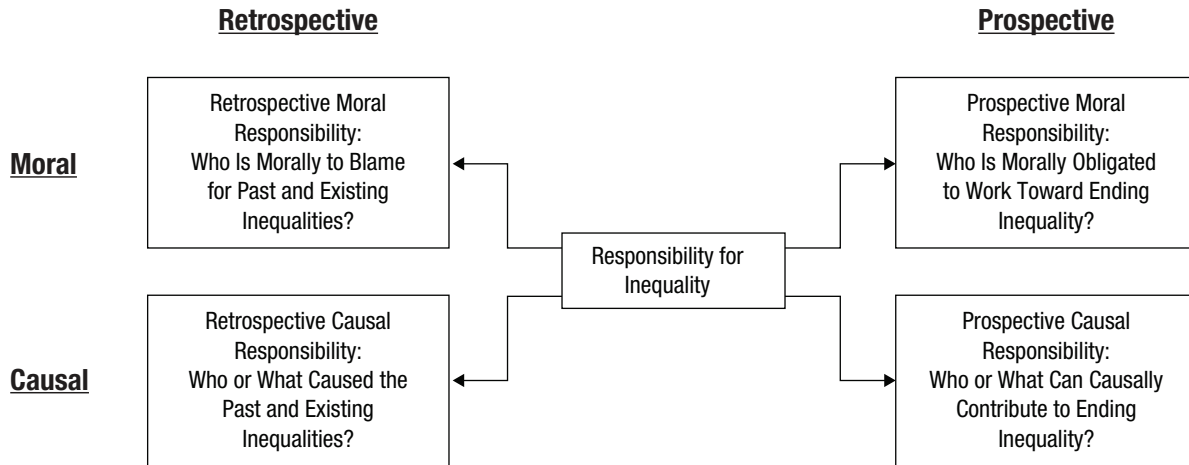
Psychologists have studied how people answer such questions about responsibility for inequality, including the factors that influence whether they tend to cite structural versus individual causes (Amemiya et al., 2023). There has been much less work, however, on more future-oriented judgments of responsibility: Who or what is responsible for correcting existing inequalities or preventing inequalities from arising in the future? As an example, consider White Americans today, the

majority of whom played no direct, causal role in redlining or predatory lending. Yet, some of them might feel morally responsible for making decisions that will help reduce the racial wealth gap that already exists. This simple example illustrates that responsibility for inequality is multifaceted: Beyond the structural-individual distinction, we need to recognize the moral-causal distinction (i.e., judgments concerning blameworthiness and obligation vs. judgments of causal contribution) and the retrospective-prospective distinction (i.e., judgments about the agents, actions, and conditions that led to historical or present inequalities vs. judgments about what agents can or should do to remedy existing inequalities and prevent them in the future). Figure 1 schematically presents these two distinctions and the four kinds of judgments that result from considering them together.

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**Fig. 1.** Diagram of the varieties of responsibility judgments for inequality.

In this article, we introduce these distinctions and use the resulting framework to organize existing research on judgments of responsibility for inequality. By “judgments of responsibility,” we have in mind the kinds of judgments elicited by queries about responsibility (such as those in Fig. 1), whether or not they are descriptively or normatively correct. In other words, we aim to characterize the psychology of such judgments, which is likely to depart from what history and other social sciences tell us about the actual causes of and influences on inequality and from what philosophy might tell us about how such judgments should be made. To limit the scope of this article, we focus on inequalities that involve large-scale social imbalances, such as the racial wealth gap. This includes inequalities that might be perceived as neutral or positive (e.g., age-based legal restrictions or parental-leave policies). It excludes, however, inequalities between individuals (e.g., Tori has \$30 and Jen has \$50) and nonsocial inequalities (e.g., landmasses of different countries).

Our framework for organizing research on judgments of responsibility for inequality allows us to identify important gaps in the literature and correspondingly to highlight important questions for future research. Although most research has focused on the factors that influence retrospective causal judgments (who or what causally contributed to current inequalities), social activism and policy are often concerned with prospective responsibility, both moral and causal (who has an obligation to create change and how they should go about doing so). A complete understanding of the psychology of inequality, including judgments of responsibility for inequality, thus requires attention to all four quadrants of Figure 1.

We begin by briefly introducing the concept of responsibility, drawing on extensive work in philosophy. We then introduce the moral–causal and retrospective–prospective

distinctions that define the two axes of our framework and structure the review of prior work that follows in greater detail. Organizing prior work in this way reveals one of the major lessons of our review (alluded to already): that research has been unevenly distributed across quadrants, with most research focusing on retrospective causal responsibility. We also structure our review by considering distinct sociocultural, emotional, motivational, and cognitive factors that influence judgments of responsibility within each of our four quadrants. Doing so reveals another important lesson: that the effects of each factor are not uniform across quadrants. For example, guilt (an emotional consideration) might increase feelings of prospective moral responsibility for reducing the racial wealth gap but without shifting whether people view themselves as retrospectively causally responsible for having created it (Calcagno, 2016; Sharma, 2023; Solak et al., 2017). Without attending to these distinctions, researchers could make erroneous inferences about the scope of empirical results concerning responsibility.

Inequalities in various forms have existed as long as human societies, and with them people’s judgments of who or what is to blame and what can and should be done. By understanding more about why people make the judgments they do, psychologists can not only enrich descriptive accounts of responsibility but also understand the psychological mechanisms that support greater acceptance and inclusion. For example, Meyer (2003) found that blame and prejudice can lead to chronic stress and adverse health outcomes in LGBTQ+ people. Those inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community have used this research to spread awareness of the negative effects of blame: Videos on TikTok describing Meyer’s theory have thousands of views, demonstrating that psychological research on responsibility for inequality can reach and potentially impact many

people (e.g., Farida, 2023; Wallis, 2024). But as this article demonstrates, the scope of our impact as researchers is currently limited. We hope our framework is useful for guiding future work, with the goal of developing and sharing a fuller picture of the psychology of inequality judgments.

## Conceptual Foundations of Responsibility

Why does responsibility matter? Schlenker et al. (1994) theorized that responsibility matters because individuals and society use the concept to set expectations for behavior and create grounds to sanction others (or oneself) for violations of those expectations. For example, if someone judges an inequality (such as the racial wealth gap) to be a problematic or undesirable outcome, appealing to “responsibility” can help them make determinations about why it occurred (retrospective causal responsibility), who or what should be blamed (retrospective moral responsibility), and who can and should take action (prospective causal and moral responsibility). The concept of “responsibility” can also support judgments that go beyond the scope of this article, such as whether anyone should be held legally responsible.

Despite the societal and interpersonal importance of responsibility judgments and decades of related research in psychology (e.g., Alicke, 2000; Cushman, 2008; Hamilton, 1978; Langenhoff et al., 2021; Malle, 2021; Shaver, 1985) and philosophy (e.g., Sartorio, 2007; Shoemaker, 2015; Talbert, 2022), researchers have not settled on a universally accepted and well-specified account of what it is (Gailey & Falk, 2008; Malle, 2021; Ricoeur, 2000). This may be in part because responsibility is used in such heterogeneous ways (moral and causal, retrospective and prospective), as our framework aims to acknowledge. Another factor could be that, historically, the concept of “responsibility” was primarily used in political philosophy to discuss the roles of government (McKeon, 1957). Only since the 20th century has responsibility been a focus of philosophical and psychological discussion as it applies to individual agents (and even more recently as it applies to collective agents; Feinberg, 1968; R. H. Williams, 2006).

Notwithstanding this underspecification, some key themes have emerged in discussions of responsibility. For one, most accounts of responsibility include a role for causality. Consider a loan officer who denies a Black family’s mortgage but approves the mortgage of a comparable White family on the basis of race. That officer has some causal responsibility for the race-based inequality between the families’ wealth in the sense that the inequality counterfactually depends on their

decision (Lagnado et al., 2013). Given that inequalities (such as the racial wealth gap) rarely hinge on the actions of any one individual, however, it is also important to have notions of causal responsibility that can account for collective outcomes. For example, if Jacob votes for a political candidate who supports maintaining current tax structures that disproportionately benefit wealthy White families, then many accounts would deem Jacob at least partially responsible for the persistence of the racial wealth gap, even though the outcome is unlikely to counterfactually depend on Jacob’s vote (Chockler & Halpern, 2004).

Most often, moral responsibility is thought to require causal responsibility (Alicke, 1992; Knobe, 2005; Zimmermann et al., 2011): If a given individual is not causally responsible, they cannot be morally responsible (Lucas, 1995; Shaver, 1985; see also Driver, 2008). However, some accounts reject this requirement (Leslie, 1993; Sartorio, 2007; Sosa, 1991). Consider Olivia, who inherits a large sum of money from her White grandparents. Her grandparents gained this wealth in part because of racist policies that helped them obtain a superior education. Although Olivia has no retrospective causal responsibility for those racist policies, some might judge her morally responsible for recognizing those policies as racist and for aiming to rectify the resulting inequality. Note that in a case like this one, prospective moral responsibility might not even require prospective causal responsibility: Some might judge Olivia morally responsible for trying to rectify the consequences of racist policies even if her inheritance is too small (or poorly used) to make a difference.

Another interesting example comes from cases of overdetermination in which multiple agents bring about an outcome but each agent’s actions were individually sufficient for the outcome to occur. Consider a group of loan officers, any one of whom can prevent the approval of a loan to a Black applicant by raising some concern, and suppose that they all do. In this case the rejection of the loan is overdetermined. The perceived causal responsibility of any one loan officer might be diminished by the presence of alternative sufficient causes (Lagnado et al., 2013), but if the loan officers acted from racist motivations, their individual moral responsibility for an unjust outcome might not be similarly mitigated (Keshmirian et al., 2022). Regardless of whether one endorses the requirement of causal responsibility for moral responsibility, the debate surrounding moral–causal dependence highlights the distinction between moral and causal judgments.

The retrospective–prospective distinction receives less attention, particularly in the psychology literature, but is no less important. Multiple philosophers have taken this distinction seriously and argued for its importance in discussions of responsibility. R. H. Williams

(2006), for example, equated prospective responsibilities with “duties,” such as the duty to vote. He argued that “blameworthiness [retrospective responsibility] and liability to compensate [prospective responsibility] are different things, and may need to be justified in different ways. However, this question has not really been systematically pursued by moral philosophers” (R. H. Williams, 2006, para. 31). Philosophers have more systematically pursued a related but importantly different distinction: between “backward-looking” and “forward-looking” responsibility. This distinction concerns the function of attributing responsibility for past actions (e.g., van de Poel, 2011), in which the function can be backward-looking (such as retribution) or forward-looking (such as moral learning). In our taxonomy, both of these judgments are retrospective because they concern past or current inequalities, even if their function is forward-looking. For a responsibility judgment to be “prospective,” as we use the term, it must address who can or should take action to correct or prevent an inequality.

It is also useful to clarify the distinction between responsibility and “attributions” (as the term is used in attribution theory). Attribution theory has traditionally focused on causes of outcomes or assignment of blame, making it well suited to understanding retrospective judgments for inequality. For example, Malle (2022) described attributions as (a) explanations or answers to why questions (analogous to retrospective causal-responsibility attributions) or (b) ascriptions of blame (analogous to retrospective moral-responsibility attributions).

However, traditional attribution theory is insufficient to account for prospective judgments about how individuals can or should take action to address inequality. We use the term “responsibility” because it captures both. For example, capturing retrospective responsibility, A. E. Williams et al. (2011) asked participants to rate the extent to which various agents (the government, the economy, and consumers) were responsible for a bankruptcy. On the other hand, capturing prospective responsibility, Montada and Schneider (1989) asked participants to rate their agreement that governments ought to do more to reduce unemployment in the future. The literature uses “responsibility” for both cases even though they are psychologically distinct. We hope that bringing to light these distinctions will make it easier for researchers to be clearer in their measurement and communication. In the next two sections, we consider the moral-causal and retrospective-prospective distinctions in further detail.

## **Moral Responsibility Versus Causal Responsibility**

Judgments of retrospective moral responsibility concern the extent to which an agent is blameworthy or

praiseworthy for behaviors that led to an outcome, often requiring that the agent could have done otherwise (Eshleman, 2008; Talbert, 2022). If the outcome is viewed as negative, this can result in moral blame. If the outcome is viewed as positive, this can result in moral praise (although the relationship between blame and praise need not be asymmetrical; see Guglielmo & Malle, 2015; Talbert, 2022). Here we focus primarily on judgments of moral blame for inequality, although we note that someone could judge an inequality to be morally neutral or even positive (thus deserving praise). Our focus on moral blame is in keeping with the majority of extant work (Talbert, 2022) and could reflect a broader human tendency to overemphasize blame and underemphasize praise (Watson, 1996). Future work can investigate additional factors affecting moral-responsibility judgments concerning neutral or positive outcomes (see Nelkin, 2008; Wolf, 1980).

Unlike judgments of moral responsibility, judgments of causal responsibility concern the extent to which an agent (or action or other entity) played a causal role in generating some outcome. There are many potential causal judgments that could be relevant, including judgments of the magnitude or strength of a causal contribution and judgments that something is “the” cause or the “actual” cause of some outcome (for discussion, see Lagnado et al., 2013; Waldmann, 2017). How such judgments are cashed out depends on one’s account of causation. Although there have been many accounts dating back at least to Plato and Aristotle (see Ruben, 1990), one prominent approach is counterfactual such that causal judgments involve a comparison to counterfactual alternatives to identify whether and how different factors “made a difference” to a given outcome (Lagnado et al., 2013; Woodward, 2005). According to a widely accepted interventionist approach, for example, A caused B if “there are a set of possible interventions on A (forced changes in the value of that variable) that change the value of B (or the probability distribution over B’s values)” (Lagnado et al., 2013, p. 1041). For instance, one judges that redlining (a) is causally responsible for the racial wealth gap (b) if one judges that interventions on redlining (such as policies better protecting Black Americans) would have reduced the racial wealth gap (for further discussion of causal responsibility, see Beebe & Buckwalter, 2010; Collins et al., 2004; Woodward, 2011). Within psychology, counterfactual accounts have also been extended to deal with collective outcomes, although more work remains to be done (Gerstenberg & Lagnado, 2010, 2023).

Although moral and causal responsibility often go hand in hand, psychological judgments of causal and moral responsibility can also come apart: Not all cases



of causal responsibility involve moral responsibility (consider a baby who accidentally breaks a vase), and (more controversially) there might be cases of moral responsibility without causal responsibility (consider our earlier example of Olivia, who inherits money accrued through racist policies). Judgments of causal and moral responsibility can also be teased apart in terms of their causes and consequences. One differential cause is the role of mental states, such as intentions. Whether the harm that results from some policy is judged to be intentional, for example, might have a large effect on judgments of moral responsibility while leaving judgments of causal responsibility relatively unchanged (see Cushman, 2008). With regard to consequences, Lewry and Lombrozo (2025) found that participants' sense of moral responsibility to vote predicted whether they voted more consistently than their perceived causal responsibility. These examples illustrate that although causal and moral responsibility might be conceptually related (and often empirically correlated), they should not be conflated: Different psychological factors can moderate moral versus causal judgments, and moral versus causal judgments might be differentially associated with other measures of interest.

### **Retrospective Responsibility Versus Prospective Responsibility**

Retrospective responsibility concerns who or what is (causally or morally) responsible for the historical or present existence of inequalities. What agents, actions, and conditions brought the inequalities about? These judgments often involve identifying individuals, groups, or systems perceived as responsible for creating or maintaining unequal conditions. In contrast, prospective responsibility involves the future, concerning who or what is (causally or morally) responsible for ending inequality. What can or should an agent do to repair existing inequalities and prevent them from occurring in the future (Smiley, 2023)? These judgments often involve identifying individuals, groups, or systems that are perceived as responsible for taking action to address and alleviate inequality, assigning agency and duty to those who have the moral or causal responsibility to make a difference. Prospective causal responsibility can thus be thought of as having the perceived power or ability to affect change, whereas prospective moral responsibility can be thought of as having a moral obligation to affect change. (We note that our use of "prospective causal responsibility" here might more naturally map on to "causal power" or "causal potential" in regular speech.)

Importantly, the distinction between retrospective and prospective responsibility makes sense only from

the perspective of a specified moment in time, typically the present. Today's prospective actions will, at some point in the future, be subject to retrospective evaluation. But it doesn't follow that judgments of prospective responsibility at time  $t$  will correspond to judgments of retrospective responsibility at time  $t + n$ . Suppose Olivia decides to donate her inheritance to various efforts to reduce the racial wealth gap. She might do so from a sense of prospective moral responsibility ("It's my duty"), supported by a sense of prospective causal responsibility ("I think I can make a difference"). When the present becomes the past, we can evaluate whether to hold her retrospectively morally responsible for reducing inequality, but this is a different judgment from the initial assessment of prospective moral responsibility. For example, someone could plausibly judge Olivia to have no obligation to donate her inheritance (prospective moral) but when she does so anyway judge her praiseworthy (retrospective moral). For causal responsibility, her donation could be anticipated to be effective, resulting in a positive prospective judgment, but turn out to play no causal role, resulting in a negative or neutral retrospective judgment. In what follows, we apply the terms "prospective" and "retrospective" from the perspective of the present moment for the agent making a judgment.

As with causal and moral responsibility, retrospective and prospective responsibility judgments can come apart. Let's return to Olivia, who had no causal or moral responsibility for bringing about the unjust conditions responsible for her inherited wealth but who might nonetheless have a prospective moral responsibility to address the relevant injustice. This is an example of prospective (moral) responsibility in the absence of retrospective (moral or causal) responsibility. On the other hand, unevenly distributed environmental disasters could be causally responsible for existing inequalities between social groups without bearing any prospective causal or moral responsibility. As for the moral-causal distinction, these examples illustrate that judgments of prospective and retrospective responsibility are potentially dissociable, and as we discuss in our review of prior work, in some cases influenced by different factors.

### **A Framework for Research on Judgments of Responsibility for Inequality**

The two distinctions just reviewed—moral-causal and retrospective-prospective—define the four quadrants presented in Figure 1 and offer a scheme for organizing past and future research. To identify past work corresponding to each quadrant, we adhered to a two-stage database searching and citation chaining process under

the guidance of our university research librarian. This review was comprehensive but not exhaustive, and as such it could be missing some articles on this topic, particularly from psychology-adjacent fields, such as political science and sociology.

First, we identified eleven “core” articles that were clear examples of research that addresses one or more of our quadrants (for a full list of articles and detailed review procedure, see [https://osf.io/pf8s5/?view\\_only=cb38d9baea2a44a2ac4aa3bee3c20d63](https://osf.io/pf8s5/?view_only=cb38d9baea2a44a2ac4aa3bee3c20d63)). These were mostly empirical articles from psychology but also included some reviews or articles from adjacent fields. For example, Banks et al. (2019) was a core article because it empirically investigated how anger influences Black participants’ willingness to donate and protest to reduce racial inequality, reflecting judgments of prospective responsibility. From these core articles, we identified key words and phrases and then sorted them into “buckets.” For example, the “causal” bucket included causal reasoning, causal judgment, difference-making, causal inferences, and beliefs about mechanisms. The other buckets corresponded to domain (e.g., “sociocultural”); attribution words (e.g., “attribute”); and moral (e.g., “moral blame”), retrospective (e.g., “historicist narratives”), prospective (e.g., “political action”), and related (e.g., “dispositional”) attributions. Next, we used the terms within each bucket to identify search queries and then ran the search functions through Google Scholar, APA PsycInfo, and PubMed. We used Paperpile to assemble a list of potentially relevant articles. We then conducted a secondary search using LitMaps to identify any remaining related articles.

The process just described resulted in a list of approximately 129 articles, which we subjected to one further round of selection for relevance on the basis of the abstract. The resulting 92 articles were included in our review of prior work and spanned a variety of influences on judgments of responsibility: sociocultural, emotional, motivational, and cognitive. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of prior work across the quadrants of our framework and across types of factors and illustrates one benefit of our framework and review: It allows us to identify important gaps in existing research.

In the four sections that follow, we highlight key takeaways from the articles that directly focus on inequality (for a more extended discussion of all articles, see the supplementary material available on OSF). We also address what is known about how each factor influences retrospective causal, retrospective moral, and prospective responsibility judgments. We combine prospective moral and causal judgments (except where noted) because they are rarely considered separately or measured with dependent variables that allow for clear differentiation.

## Sociocultural Factors Affecting Responsibility Judgments

Sociocultural factors identify aspects of society and norms that influence thoughts and behavior, such as parent, peer, and educational influences, which in turn affect judgments of responsibility. These relationships can be quite complex.

With respect to retrospective causal judgments, there is evidence that several factors influence structural thinking about inequality, including participation in social movements (Kelly, 2011; Montoya, 2021; Stewart et al., 1998), parents (Flanagan et al., 2014), peers (Flanagan et al., 2014), and education (Bracher et al., 2019; Guimond & Palmer, 1990; Guimond et al., 1989; Lopez et al., 1998; Mistry et al., 2012). For example, Flanagan et al. (2014) found that children from more educated families are more likely to attribute inequality to structural rather than to personal causes. Interestingly, this correlation existed regardless of the frequency of discussions about current events at home, suggesting that indirect signals from parents can significantly influence children’s views. However, the effects of these factors can be outweighed by predominant cultural narratives, such as the “myth of agency” in the United States (Finley & Diversi, 2010; Frye, 2019; Harding, 2010), which encourages individualistic judgments of retrospective causal responsibility.

Retrospective moral judgments have received much less attention, but existing research suggests that cultural and personal narratives can shift people toward structural (Gill & Cerce, 2017, 2021; Gill & Ungson, 2018) or individual (Laney et al., 2014; Martin, 2015) judgments depending on the content of the narrative. Gill and colleagues (2017, 2018, 2021) found that understanding the life histories of disadvantaged individuals (a form of personal narrative) can lead to a more nuanced view: When people are made aware of the complex backgrounds and challenges faced by these individuals, they tend to perceive them as having less control over their situation, thereby reducing both causal responsibility and moral blame. This research is particularly helpful because it demonstrates how narratives can shape both causal and moral judgments.

Last, prior work has also investigated the effects of sociocultural factors on prospective responsibility, although a great deal remains to be done. Although social movements (Diani, 2011; Saavedra & Yoo, 2023), family discussions (R. González et al., 2021; A. M. González et al., 2022), peer influence (Diemer et al., 2009, 2011; Vine & Greenwood, 2023), formal education (Lopez et al., 1998; Mistry et al., 2012), and social media (Bennet & Segerberg, 2011; Kende et al., 2016; Spears et al., 2002) play a role in shifting judgments toward or

**Table 1.** Quantities of Articles Published Addressing Each of the Four Quadrants of Responsibility Judgments From Various Domains of Psychology Research

| Factor                         | Retrospective moral responsibility | Retrospective causal responsibility | Prospective moral responsibility | Prospective causal responsibility |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Sociocultural                  |                                    |                                     |                                  |                                   |
| Cultural narratives            | ●                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ●                                 |
| Social movements               | ○                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ○                                 |
| Socialization—parents          | ○                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ○                                 |
| Socialization—peers            | ○                                  | ●                                   | ●                                | ●                                 |
| Socialization—formal education | ●                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ●                                 |
| Socialization—media            | ○                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ●                                 |
| Emotional                      |                                    |                                     |                                  |                                   |
| Anger                          | ○                                  | ●                                   | ●                                | ●                                 |
| Empathy                        | ○                                  | ●                                   | ●                                | ●                                 |
| Guilt                          | ○                                  | ○                                   | ○                                | ●                                 |
| Motivational                   |                                    |                                     |                                  |                                   |
| System justification motives   | ●                                  | ●                                   | ●                                | ●                                 |
| Social identity motives        | ○                                  | ●                                   | ●                                | ●                                 |
| Perceived threat               | ○                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ○                                 |
| Self-enhancement motives       | ○                                  | ○                                   | ○                                | ○                                 |
| Cost-benefit analyses          | ○                                  | ○                                   | ●                                | ●                                 |
| Cognitive                      |                                    |                                     |                                  |                                   |
| In-group/out-group bias        | ●                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ○                                 |
| Belief in a just world         | ●                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ●                                 |
| Reflective thinking            | ○                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ○                                 |
| Counterfactual reasoning       | ●                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ●                                 |
| Attribution bias               | ●                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ○                                 |
| Perceived personal control     | ○                                  | ●                                   | ○                                | ●                                 |
| Perceived efficacy             | ○                                  | ○                                   | ○                                | ●                                 |
| Metaethical beliefs            | ●                                  | ●                                   | ●                                | ●                                 |

Note: ● = multiple articles have directly investigated how this factor affects these responsibility judgments in the domain of inequality; ● = one article has directly investigated how this factor affects these responsibility judgments, or multiple articles have investigated it in other domains (i.e., not inequality); ○ = no articles have directly investigated how this factor affects these responsibility judgments, or very few articles have investigated it in other domains.

away from structural attributions, understanding and engaging with social structures appear to be crucial to structural thinking. These effects are complex and can depend on the content or duration of the discussions, education, or media (Mistry et al., 2012).

Although several factors have been shown to influence both retrospective and prospective judgments, more work must be done to connect the two. For example, White women who participated in social movements were more likely to view inequality through a systemic lens compared with White women who were not participants in the movement (a retrospective causal judgment; Stewart et al., 1998). Prospectively, social movements allow participants to create a sense of community that lowers the barriers to individual participation (Diani, 2011; Saavedra & Yoo, 2023). Thus, social movements influence both retrospective and prospective responsibility, but plausibly via different mechanisms; if social-movement participation results in structural

attributions for inequality, then it might make participants feel *less* personally obligated to participate in the future, but the opposite is observed. This is one example of the gaps remaining in our understanding of socioculturally influenced responsibility judgments.

## Emotional Factors Affecting Responsibility Judgments

Emotional factors refer to feelings and affective states that influence thoughts and behavior, thus affecting judgments of responsibility. With regard to retrospective causal judgments, prior work has found that empathizing with targets of discrimination can promote a structural understanding of inequality (Betancourt, 1990; Todd & Galinsky, 2014; Vescio et al., 2003). However, being in an angry emotional state can increase susceptibility to cognitive biases, such as in-group/out-group bias or attribution bias, and heighten perceived threat,

which can increase individual causal and moral blame (Ahearn, 1999; Blair, 2012; Carnahan et al., 2023; Jost et al., 2012; J. S. Lerner & Keltner, 2001; List & Pettit, 2011; Quigley & Tedeschi, 1996; Small & Lerner, 2008; C. A. Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Tetlock et al., 2007; Wakslak et al., 2007),

These same emotions can also have prospective effects. Greater empathy (e.g., via contact with disadvantaged others or induced through emotional video clips) can increase participants' willingness to address systemic causes of inequality, for instance, by engaging in collective actions such as attending protests or writing letters to public officials (Barraza & Zak, 2009; Selvanathan et al., 2018; Shoemaker, 2017; Tagler & Cozzarelli, 2013; Weiner, 1993). Guilt similarly motivates a sense of personal responsibility for ending inequality (Calcagno, 2016; Sharma, 2023; Solak et al., 2017). Anger, on the other hand, can be a double-edged sword: Although it can increase individual causal and moral blame in retrospective contexts, it can also fuel collective action against structural injustices (Banks et al., 2019; Mallett et al., 2008; Ost, 2004; Renström & Bäck, 2021; van Zomeren et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2009).

These seemingly contradictory effects of anger could stem from differences in both the *target* and *type* of anger: Anger directed at disadvantaged individuals often increases blame, whereas anger directed at injustice or systemic actors can promote moral outrage and mobilization (Feigenson, 2016). Similarly, the effects of anger might differ depending on whether the emotion is *incidental* (aroused by unrelated contexts) or *integral* (aroused by the inequality itself), with only the latter reliably motivating structural-level responses. Despite these complex relationships, it is clear that emotions play an important role in shaping our responses to inequality—both our judgments and our actions.

While recognizing that emotional factors affect responsibility judgments differently depending on the target and type of emotion, we can still draw speculative conclusions about how different quadrants of our framework might be related. For example, Todd et al. (2012) told participants about a Black student's difficulties adjusting to college. Compared with participants who were asked to suppress stereotypes, participants who were told to take a Black target's perspective endorsed more discrimination-based and less motivation-based explanations for this outcome. This retrospective judgment is closely related to the finding that increased contact with groups experiencing inequality can increase empathy with group members, promoting engagement in collective action (Selvanathan et al., 2018). So, at least in some cases, empathy has been shown to have a similar impact on retrospective judgments and prospective motivations.

## Motivational Factors Affecting Responsibility Judgments

Motivational factors refer to the drives and desires that direct behavior toward goals that affect judgments of responsibility. With respect to retrospective judgments, motivational factors, such as system justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Kallio & Niemelä, 2014; Kay et al., 2005; McCoy & Major, 2007; Montada & Schneider, 1989; Napier et al., 2006; Ståhl et al., 2010) and perceived threat (Becker et al., 2011; Bukowski et al., 2017; Hirsch et al., 2021; Spaccatini et al., 2022), often lead people to causally and morally blame individuals for their own inequality. However, identifying with marginalized groups can shift this viewpoint, encouraging the recognition of systemic issues instead (Cozzarelli et al., 2002; Graham-Bailey et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2013; Suhay et al., 2021).

Shifting to prospective responsibility, system justification generally reduces the motivation to participate in collective action (Jost et al., 2012, 2017; Vogel & Jackson, 2016), but identifying with the group disadvantaged by an inequality can increase personal responsibility and drive social change (e.g., someone who is gay might be more likely to write letters in support of LGBTQ-friendly policies; Schulte et al., 2020; Tajfel, 1974; van Zomeren et al., 2012; see also Kawakami & Dion, 1995; Thomas et al., 2009; van Zomeren et al., 2004). Social identity is unique within the scope of our review because it is one of the only factors for which prospective causal judgments have been dissociated from prospective moral judgments. Specifically, van Zomeren et al. (2018) argued that the social identity model of collective action, which has traditionally focused on efficacy (a belief about causality), needs to be extended to add a role for moral convictions. The authors noted that group identification influences what an individual's moral convictions are (i.e., what they will and will not stand for), and vice versa, such that an individual's moral convictions influence their group identification and shape their moral actions (which presumably reflect prospective judgments).

Another factor that influences prospective judgments is cost-benefit analysis, which plays a critical role in an individual's decision of whether to engage in collective action (Downs, 1957; Finkel et al., 1989; Heckathorn, 1996; Marwell & Oliver, 1993; Olson, 1989; Pacek et al., 2009; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968; Useem, 1998). Overall, although certain motivations can discourage action against inequality, strong group ties, a clear understanding of systemic problems, and a cost-benefit analysis that favors action can encourage individuals to seek change.

One cross-quadrant example that emerges from this review is that system justification affects moral and



causal retrospective judgments in a similar way. System-justifying beliefs, such as the belief that current social structures are good, can motivate individuals to justify or defend existing social systems, even when the system is disadvantageous to themselves or others (Jost & Banaji, 1994). System justification affects retrospective responsibility judgments by leading people to attribute perceived bad outcomes to individuals rather than to (good) systems. This can be causal (e.g., “Women have lower paying jobs because they’re less intelligent”; Kallio & Niemelä, 2014; McCoy & Major, 2007) or moral (e.g., “Those in poverty are morally responsible for their situation”; Montada & Schneider, 1989). This is also consistent with the prospective findings: Believing that the existing system is justified and fair, regardless of perceived inequality, motivates people to causally and morally attribute that inequality to individuals and discourages them from viewing themselves as responsible for ending inequality.

### **Cognitive Factors Affecting Responsibility Judgments**

Cognitive factors refer to the mental operations involved in information processing, such as reasoning, attention, and memory, that affect judgments of responsibility. Retrospective causal responsibility is the quadrant to have received the most attention in prior psychological research, and much of this work has focused on cognitive factors. At a broad level, biases such as belief in a just world (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; M. J. Lerner, 1980; McCoy & Major, 2007; K. B. Smith, 1985; Zucker & Weiner, 1993), immanent justice (Callan & Ellard, 2010; Maes, 1998), and attribution bias (Harvey et al., 1981; Jang, 2013; Pettigrew, 1979; Ross, 1977; Stephens & Levine, 2011) and metaethical beliefs that individual actions drive progress (Lewry, Asifriyaz, & Lombrozo, 2024; Lewry, Tsai, & Lombrozo, 2024) can shift retrospective causal responsibility toward individual attributions, whereas processes such as cognitive reflection (Cimpian & Salomon, 2014; Peretz-Lange et al., 2021; Vasilyeva et al., 2018) can pull them toward the structural. Counterfactual reasoning (Amemiya et al., 2023; Gerstenberg, 2022) can also shift judgments from the individualistic to the structural depending on the counterfactuals entertained. Although there has been less work on retrospective moral responsibility, existing research has explored factors that lead to individuals being the targets of moral blame (Branscombe et al., 2003; de Vel-Palumbo & Berryessa, 2023; Mandel & Dhami, 2005).

Prior work suggests that the way people think about their moral or causal responsibility to *end* inequality—prospective responsibility—depends on their counterfactual reasoning (Badaan et al., 2020; Catellani et al.,

2014; Milesi & Catellani, 2011; Pereira & Santos, 2019), sense of control and efficacy (Bamberg et al., 2015; Bandura, 1986; Gulliver et al., 2022; Heath & Gifford, 2006; Hornsey & Fielding, 2016; Jugert et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2018; Laird, 2003; Lewry, Asifriyaz, & Lombrozo, 2024; Wallston et al., 1987; Whillans & Dunn, 2018; Whillans et al., 2017), and beliefs about the nature of morality (Barth et al., 2015; Callan & Ellard, 2010; Lewry, Asifriyaz, & Lombrozo, 2024; Lewry, Tsai, & Lombrozo, 2024; Mazzoni & Cicognani, 2013). For example, Barth et al. (2015) found that participants who hold absolute moral standards (i.e., moral standards against which everyone can be equally judged) are more likely to participate in collective action. Those who hold absolutist beliefs about human rights (such as the notion that water is a human right) are similarly more likely to participate in collective action (e.g., to promote the availability of water; Mazzoni & Cicognani, 2013). This research has primarily explored how these commitments motivate people to action, but it also demonstrates how belief in a just world inhibits action. More work must be done to distinguish when this action-motivation is causal (can I act?) versus moral (should I act?).

For cognitive factors, some cross-quadrant questions have been explored. For example, Lewry, Asifriyaz, and Lombrozo (2024) found that participants’ retrospective causal explanations for how societal change occurs predict the extent to which participants feel that their own civic engagement is necessary. But many cross-quadrant questions remain open. Although some research has examined how retrospective causal judgments shape prospective moral responsibility, less is known about the reverse: how prospective moral commitments influence retrospective causal judgments. Cognitive dissonance and motivated reasoning theories suggest that people might revise past judgment to align with current moral commitments (Festinger, 1957; Kunda, 1990) such that committing to take action against inequality could prompt a shift in explanations of its causes. This shift could be especially likely among individuals with metaethical beliefs that frame morality as action-guiding (Lewry, Tsai, & Lombrozo, 2024), yet this cross-quadrant question remains underexplored.

### **General Discussion**

A primary goal of this article is to allow psychology researchers interested in responsibility and inequality to better identify gaps in the literature and valuable directions for future work. Existing research on judgments of responsibility for inequality has primarily focused on retrospective causal responsibility (i.e., who or what caused past and existing inequalities). This focus excludes three additional and important

questions: prospective causal responsibility (who or what can causally contribute to ending inequality), retrospective moral responsibility (who is morally to blame for past and existing inequalities), and prospective moral responsibility (who is morally obligated to work toward ending inequality). Empirical and theoretical studies of responsibility in philosophy and psychology sometimes distinguish causal and moral responsibility (Alicke, 1992; Knobe, 2005; Zimmermann et al., 2011) and retrospective and prospective responsibility (van de Poel, 2011; R. H. Williams, 2006) but rarely offer systematic comparisons. By bringing these two distinctions together, we can chart new territory for navigating judgments of responsibility for inequality. Here we highlight three especially promising directions: filling gaps in existing quadrants, avoiding unwarranted conclusions, and asking cross-quadrant questions. We also discuss additional distinctions that are not directly addressed in this article, namely individual versus collective responsibility and legal responsibility.

### ***Filling research gaps***

Recognizing the relatively uncharted quadrants of responsibility invites the progress that has been made concerning retrospective causal responsibility to be extended to other quadrants. In particular, work on retrospective causal responsibility has greatly contributed to psychologists' ability to predict and intervene on explanations for inequality, which can increase explanation accuracy, shift policy support, and reduce harmful beliefs (Amemiya et al., 2023; Bian et al., 2018; Branscombe et al., 2003; Browman et al., 2019; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018; Piff et al., 2020; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021; Rucker & Richeson, 2021; Soyly Yalcinkaya et al., 2017). However, such predictive power and ability to intervene is sparser within the other three quadrants. Very little is known about how any cognitive factors influence prospective moral responsibility judgments, in part because within prospective judgments, moral and causal responsibility are rarely disentangled. For example, although there is evidence that parents' beliefs and explanations impact how children explain the existence of inequality (A. M. Gonzalez et al., 2022), and there is evidence of a correlation between parents' participation in collective action and their children's participation (R. González et al., 2021), it is unknown whether or how parents' collective-action participation influences their children's sense of moral or causal responsibility for ending inequality.

Comparing existing research across quadrants reveals another instructive discrepancy: the types of dependent variables typically used in retrospective versus prospective research. Of the articles included in this review,

100% of retrospective research (40 of 40 articles) used a dependent variable that directly asked participants to make a responsibility judgment (e.g., level of agreement that "immigrants are the cause of the financial crisis"; Becker et al., 2011). In contrast, only 29% of articles reporting prospective research (15 of 51 articles) used a dependent variable directly asking about responsibility. More often, these studies rely on actual or intended behavior (e.g., "How often in the upcoming year do you intend to participate in activities promoted by the Democrats of the Left?"; Milesi & Catellani, 2011). We include these indirect measures in the review because they are likely tied to beliefs about responsibility. For example, I am unlikely to donate to a cause if I don't believe I have any moral or causal responsibility to do so. But it is worth recognizing that much prospective research requires an additional inference to be made because direct judgments of responsibility are infrequently measured. To better connect retrospective and prospective research, future work should use more direct measures (for an interactive table of the dependent variables used in all empirical studies in this review, see the supplementary material on OSF).

### ***Avoiding bad inferences***

Alongside this call to generalize successes from one quadrant to another comes an important call for caution in generalizing existing findings. By regimenting the space of responsibility judgments, our framework makes it easier to recognize when evidence is restricted to a subset of quadrants such that generalizations from one quadrant to another are unwarranted. As one example from our review, there is evidence that counterfactual reasoning affects retrospective causal reasoning judgments. When people counterfactually reason about alternate possibilities, they tend to consider different structures or circumstances that could have prevented inequality (Amemiya et al., 2021, 2023). This research has allowed researchers to identify intervention points to encourage structural thinking about inequality through counterfactual explanations (Amemiya et al., 2023). Understanding such effects is valuable not only because it can promote more accurate explanations of inequality (Bian et al., 2018; Browman et al., 2019; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021) but also because these intervention points can affect policy support (Piff et al., 2020; Soyly Yalcinkaya et al., 2017) and reduce harmful beliefs about disadvantaged groups (Branscombe et al., 2003; Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018; Rucker & Richeson, 2021). But what are the implications for judgments of prospective moral responsibility?

It might be tempting to assume that similar effects will apply such that interventions on counterfactual

reasoning will increase structural attributions for prospective moral judgments. But this inference would be hasty because different mechanisms could govern judgments of retrospective causal responsibility versus prospective moral responsibility. For instance, one possibility is that encouraging particular forms of counterfactual reasoning increases the extent to which participants judge structural factors (retrospectively causally) responsible for the racial wealth gap and subsequently reduces their moral blame toward individuals experiencing the inequality. This reduction in retrospective moral responsibility could in turn increase prospective moral responsibility for ending the inequality. But it's also possible that increasing structural attributions for retrospective causal judgments will not increase the moral responsibility that an individual attributes to structures—perhaps because they are unwilling to “blame” nonagents. And even if participants do assign moral responsibility to structures, they might not regard structures as effective vehicles of change and thus fail to show a shift in prospective moral judgments. This is an example of how evidence concerning retrospective causal judgments underdetermines claims about prospective moral judgments. In most cases, generalizing from one quadrant of our framework to another will require additional evidence from targeted studies.

### ***New cross-quadrant questions***

Bringing together research on the causal-moral and retrospective-prospective distinctions clarifies which questions within each quadrant have yet to be adequately addressed. In particular, it calls attention to the paucity of research on judgments of prospective moral responsibility. But just as importantly, it calls attention to new and important “cross-quadrant” questions. One example—which *has* been the target of prior work—is whether and how judgments of retrospective moral responsibility depend on judgments of retrospective causal responsibility (e.g., whether someone can be morally blamed for an inequality they did not cause; Lucas, 1995; Shaver, 1985; see also Driver, 2008; Leslie, 1993; Sartorio, 2007; Sosa, 1991). But how do judgments of prospective responsibility depend on such judgments? Only a handful of studies have considered this question. As one example from our review, Lewry, Asifriyaz, and Lombrozo (2024) investigated how intentions to donate (reflecting prospective responsibility) depend on an individual's beliefs about how moral progress has occurred (reflecting retrospective causal responsibility). They found that individuals who identified human action as causally responsible for moral progress were more likely to opt to donate in response to a moral setback.

Recent work has also focused on the dissociation between prospective causal and moral responsibility. Although people typically act because they believe their actions will make a difference (Hines et al., 1987; Sabucedo et al., 2018; van Zomeren et al., 2012; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988), this cannot account for collective-action cases in which each individual contribution makes little or no difference. Lewry and Lombrozo (2025) found that while causal responsibility (feeling that your vote will make a difference) sometimes motivates voting, it does so less consistently than moral responsibility (feeling a duty to vote).

Other cross-quadrant questions warrant empirical focus. For example, people might believe that federal governments have the most prospective causal power to reduce the racial wealth gap but also resist assigning the government prospective moral responsibility because of mistrust. This mistrust would likely stem from people's beliefs about the retrospective causal and moral responsibility government had in creating the racial wealth gap. In cases like this, in which the government's prospective causal responsibility is high but its prospective moral responsibility is low (and these perceptions stem from retrospective responsibility), do individual citizens take action?

As another example, imagine two White American high schoolers who learn about the joint contributions of the government and individual White people to the existence of the racial wealth gap. One student uses this retrospective explanation as evidence that the government had causal and moral culpability and thus believes the government should be prospectively responsible for correcting the problem. The other student reasons that, although he was not personally responsible for the wealth gap, he identifies with the group responsible and therefore has a responsibility to remedy it. Vallabha et al. (2024) found that the latter is more likely to occur if the historical and current groups are more connected and if the current group is more privileged, continues to harm victims, and has not made attempts to remedy the situation. This helps clarify group-based differences that affect moral judgments. Future work could also explore the individual differences that lead people to act or not.

Bringing attention to the cross-quadrant distinction between retrospective blame judgments and prospective calls to action offers a practical benefit for those who desire to make a social change without targeting groups or individuals who are wrongful recipients of blame. For example, in conversations about obesity, people who suggest solutions such as improving food access are sometimes misinterpreted as blaming individuals for their health, even when the intent is to promote future solutions. Or attempts to boost voter

turnout can backfire if moral messaging (“It’s your duty to vote”) reaches citizens who feel morally blamed for their past failure to vote. This framework can help disentangle those judgments, enabling clearer communication and increased civic engagement. We hope that future research considers additional cross-quadrant questions, including the roles of sociocultural, emotional, motivational, and cognitive factors.

### ***Individual, collective, and legal responsibility***

Although one goal of this article is to argue for the importance of the causal-moral and retrospective-prospective dimensions of responsibility judgments, these are not the only distinctions worth considering. We have already seen how the distinction between individual and structural factors has fruitfully guided prior research. Beyond these three dimensions, it might be especially important to consider the distinction between individual responsibility (which has been our primary focus here) and collective responsibility. Collective responsibility concerns groups, rather than individuals, as moral or causal agents (Smiley, 2023). Collective responsibility has been studied both retrospectively (e.g., “How did groups contribute to policies and beliefs that led to the racial wealth gap?” or “Can groups such as White Americans today be held morally responsible for the historical actions of White Americans?”; Darby & Branscombe, 2014; Gilbert, 2006; McKeown, 2021) and prospectively (e.g., “What ought we, as a society, do to decrease the racial wealth gap?” or “How can large-scale groups be effective at decreasing the racial wealth gap?”; Haugstad et al., 2021; Miller, 2007; Corcoran et al., 2011). The individual-collective distinction adds additional nuance to the study of responsibility judgments for inequality, and more work examining its interaction with other dimensions would be valuable.

A full treatment of responsibility judgments will also require grappling with legal responsibility. Although there is less research in psychology on lay beliefs about legal responsibility (but see Feigenson & Park, 2006; Ugwuegbu, 1979), judgments of legal responsibility are certainly important for understanding beliefs about inequality. For example, some people might not believe that White Americans have a moral obligation to pay reparations to Black Americans (prospective moral) or have the means to do so (prospective causal) but still believe that Black Americans should be legally owed reparations. Better understanding conceptions of legal responsibility would allow us to better predict justifications of punishment, as well as how people think about legal responsibility for ending inequality (e.g., “What

role should the Supreme Court play in creating change?”; Clark et al., 2024).

In this article we focused on sociocultural, emotional, motivational, and cognitive factors. But other areas of psychology can provide useful insight into responsibility judgments, and this framework can provide useful insight for researchers in those subdisciplines. For example, developmental research shows that children actively construct their moral and causal judgments, often prioritizing factors such as intent, harm, and group membership in ways that diverge from adults (e.g., Harris & German, 1996; Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Kuhn, 2012; Nucci & Gingo, 2010). This raises the possibility that children of different ages might engage with the dimensions of our framework in systematically different ways. Younger children, especially those who frequently experience unfairness, may be less likely to interpret large-scale inequalities in moral terms, instead viewing harm as an expected or nonmoral feature of social systems rather than as a basis for moral blame (Arsenio & Gold, 2006). Similarly, the relative influence of causal versus moral responsibility on motivating action could shift with age. Although moral responsibility might be a more consistent motivator than causal responsibility in adults (Lewry & Lombrozo, 2025), this might not align with children. We hope this framework is useful for exploring new questions in developmental science and other areas of psychology.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of “responsibility” is central to how we make sense of inequality, explain why it exists, predict whether and how it will occur in the future, morally blame others for creating or perpetuating it, and motivate ourselves and others to reduce it in the future. However, dimensions of responsibility (as they apply to judgments about inequality) have not been adequately disentangled in the literature, leading to assumptions for which there is little to no evidence, such as the idea that parents shape who children judge to be morally responsible for ending inequality merely because they shape how children explain the causes of inequality. This article reveals many opportunities for future research to broaden and clarify the psychology of inequality, which can allow us to better predict and shape the judgments we make and the actions we take.

### **Transparency**

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