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The Impact of Perceived Economic Mobility on the Preference
for Self-Reliance

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Abstract

Economic insecurity is often assumed to increase support for cooperation and collective safety nets. Yet recent years have seen a rise in individualism and demand for self-reliance instead. This thesis examines that paradox by analyzing how perceived downward mobility - measured as fear of job loss - is associated with the preference toward self-reliance. Drawing on the World Values Survey Wave 7 ($N \approx 85,000$ across 66 countries), three indicators of self-reliance were analyzed in their association with fear of job loss: valuing independence as a child quality, preferring freedom over equality, and favoring individual over governmental responsibility. Multilevel analyses tested four pre-registered hypotheses, controlling for income and other demographics. Additionally, objective country-level indicators of mobility and welfare were explored.

Fear of job loss was linked to both greater emphasis on independence and stronger preferences for equality and governmental responsibility. The associations remained after accounting for income, and higher income was generally associated with greater self-reliant attitudes. Objective indicators confirmed that countries with stronger welfare systems align with higher social mobility. Exploratory analyses further showed that welfare protection moderated the role of fear: in high-protection contexts, insecurity was more likely to foster collectivistic preferences, while fear-driven independence remained most pronounced among low-income individuals.

Overall, these findings highlight the ambivalent nature of economic insecurity: it can fuel both a turn toward institutions and a psychological push for independence. Welfare structures buffer but cannot fully eliminate the pull of fear-driven self-reliance.

Keywords: cooperation, self-reliance, economic mobility, job insecurity, welfare

Ökonomische Unsicherheit wird häufig mit einer stärkeren Unterstützung für Kooperation und kollektive Sicherheitsnetze in Verbindung gebracht. Gleichzeitig ist Individualismus und das Streben nach Eigenverantwortung in den letzten Jahren angestiegen. Diese Arbeit untersucht dieses Paradox, indem sie analysiert, wie wahrgenommene Abwärtsmobilität - gemessen als Angst vor Arbeitsplatzverlust - mit den Präferenzen für Selbstverantwortung verbunden ist.

Auf Grundlage der World Values Survey Wave 7 ($N \approx 85.000$ in 66 Ländern) wurden drei Indikatoren betrachtet: die Bewertung von Unabhängigkeit als wichtige Kindeseigenschaft, die Präferenz von Freiheit gegenüber Gleichwertigkeit sowie die Bevorzugung individueller gegenüber staatlicher Verantwortung. Mittels Mehrebenenanalysen wurden vier vorregistrierte Hypothesen getestet, wobei Einkommensunterschiede und weitere individuelle Kontrollvariablen berücksichtigt wurden. Zusätzlich wurden objektive Länderindikatoren zu Mobilität und Wohlfahrtsausgaben einbezogen.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Angst vor Arbeitsplatzverlust mit einer stärkeren Betonung von Unabhängigkeit einherging, gleichzeitig aber auch mit einer höheren Präferenz für Gleichwertigkeit und staatlicher Verantwortung verbunden war. Einkommen war ein wichtiger, aber nicht all-erklärender Faktor. Zusätzlich hing ein höheres Einkommen allgemein mit stärker selbstverantwortlichen Einstellungen zusammen. Objektive Indikatoren bestätigten einen Zusammenhang von ausgeprägten Wohlfahrtssystemen und einer höheren sozialen Mobilität. Explorative Analysen zeigten darüber hinaus, dass Wohlfahrtsschutz die Rolle der Angst moderiert: In starken Wohlfahrtsstaaten förderte Unsicherheit eher kollektivistische Präferenzen, während angstgetriebene Unabhängigkeit vor allem bei einkommensschwachen Personen zu finden war.

Insgesamt verdeutlichen die Befunde die ambivalente Natur von ökonomischer Unsicherheit: Sie kann sowohl eine Hinwendung zu Institutionen als auch einen psychologischen Drang in Richtung Eigenständigkeit auslösen. Wohlfahrtsstrukturen können einige dieser Effekte abfedern, jedoch nicht vollständig die Dynamik angstgetriebener Selbstverantwortung aufheben.

Schlüsselwörter: Kooperation, Selbstverantwortung, ökonomische Mobilität, berufliche Unsicherheit, Wohlfahrt

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The Impact of Perceived Economic Mobility on the Preference for Self-Reliance

In times of growing uncertainty about the future individuals are expected to seek security through cooperation and act more risk-averse (Chierchia et al., 2021). However, paradoxically, this period has also seen an increase in individualism as well as the valuation of independence (Santos et al., 2017). Many people strive to be more self-reliant, meaning they opt to solve problems individually rather than cooperatively. Greater risk-aversion and a desire for protection should, in theory, lead to a stronger emphasis on collectivism and institutional welfare to ensure security and stability (Durante et al., 2014). However, this period has also been marked by increased support for right-wing parties, which are typically opposed to the welfare system (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

This thesis investigates the psychological and structural mechanisms underlying this paradox by examining how perceived economic mobility is connected to preferences for self-reliance and how this dynamic may be moderated by national structures.

Self-Reliance

Public goods like security, transport, education, and healthcare benefit everyone, regardless of individual contribution, by establishing services beyond what people can achieve alone (Gross & De Dreu, 2019). However, this can be exploited, risking cooperation failure, meaning that the good cannot be provided at all (Gross et al., 2020). The associated worry can lead individuals to prefer individual solutions, opting out of public goods entirely. This shift, known as self-reliance, reduces codependency and reciprocity, both of which are essential for cooperation (Gross & De Dreu, 2019; Kollock, 1998). Self-reliance is defined by solving shared problems individually, either due to having the financial resources or being physically able, instead of relying on a public good (Gross & Böhm, 2020; Gross et al., 2020). Because of this, self-reliance is inherently connected to financial means and the freedom of choice they afford (Gross & De Dreu, 2019). Experiments have shown that rich

individuals adopted the private solutions almost twice as often as “poor” individuals (Malthouse et al., 2024) and a general tendency for richer households to support redistribution less (Cojocaru & Diagne, 2021).

Most research defines self-reliance in relation to vulnerable groups, such as refugees meeting their basic needs (Seff et al., 2021). In contrast, this research defines it as the preference for individual solutions over cooperation. Self-reliance is thus understood here through its deep connectedness to the cultural orientation of individualism, as opposed to collectivism.

Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism centers around the empowerment to make one's own decisions and to focus on rights rather than duties and social norms. Personal achievements and standing out are seen as ways to be independent from others (Binder, 2019; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As a result, individualists tend to prioritize self-interest, sometimes at the expense of collective interests (Jiao & Zhao, 2023).

On the opposite of the continuum, *collectivism* is based on interdependence and the forgoing of self-interest. Instead, it emphasizes acting in the interest of the collective (Binder, 2019; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Because of this, collectivism is usually defined by social norm-guided behaviors and loyalty to the group to which one belongs (Hofstede, 1980; Toikko & Rantanen, 2020).

These cultural orientations are often deeply embedded into the national context. Studies suggest that both are associated with political solutions. Whereas individualism is linked to political solutions that emphasize individual responsibilities, collectivism empathizes the collective responsibility of a society's members (Toikko & Rantanen, 2020). Empirical research supports these associations, as Toikko and Ratanen (2020) found that across countries, higher levels of individualism have been found to be associated with

lower support for the state's welfare responsibility. Additionally, research has shown a pronounced difference in rule-following between more collectivistic and more individualistic regions. For example, the severity of Covid-19 was higher in countries scoring high on individualism compared to those scoring high on collectivism (Huang et al., 2022).

Self-reliance Implementation in Countries

How self-reliant options are integrated into the structure of countries varies greatly and can have a profound effect on the preference of the individuals living there. Whereas some countries emphasize the state's responsibility to generate and provide services, others place this responsibility on the citizens themselves.

In most European countries, public contributions are mandatory. Private options can be added on top of these, offering additional benefits. In contrast, in the United States there is no such system in place, requiring individuals to pay for private healthcare or go without. This makes full self-reliance more pronounced and closely tied to financial means. Such a system deepens inequality, as only wealthier individuals can afford private solutions, thereby limiting cooperation (Gross & Böhm, 2020; Gross & De Dreu, 2019; Malthouse et al., 2024).

Societies marked by high inequality and close ties between wealth and political power are more likely to provide institutions for addressing shared problems individually, or even abolish public solutions altogether (Gross & Böhm, 2020). This aligns with findings that wealthier societies tend to become more individualistic (Santos et al., 2017) and, more broadly, that cross-national value differences shape economic outcomes, including redistribution (Binder, 2019). At the same time, individuals may still be willing to limit their self-reliance in order to foster interdependence and cooperation, which in turn can help reduce inequality (Gross & Böhm, 2020).

Economic Mobility

The extent to which individuals favor self-reliance over collective welfare depends not only on their current socioeconomic position but also on their expectations for upward mobility. An individual's current financial situation is one of the clearest drivers of welfare attitudes and cooperative behavior. At the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, those with low income or education tend to support the state's responsibility and redistribution (Cojocaru & Diagne, 2021; Mérola & Helgason, 2016; Toikko & Rantanen, 2020; Valdimarsdóttir, 2010; Western et al., 2012). Thus, citizens who expect to benefit from welfare tend to favor it the most, indicating self-interest (Durante et al., 2014; Mérola & Helgason, 2016). Conversely, individuals who can afford private solutions often prefer to invest in these rather than contribute to public goods (Cojocaru & Diagne, 2021; Gross & Böhm, 2020; Malthouse et al., 2024). Additionally, there is a general tendency for richer households to support redistribution less (Cojocaru & Diagne, 2021). This aligns with the definition of self-reliance: when economic means allow, individuals shift toward self-reliant behavior. Conversely, those who cannot rely on themselves tend to favor cooperation.

However, financial circumstances are not static, and are often shaped by expectations about future prospects. These expectations regarding potential changes in financial capacity can be described through the concept of economic mobility. This refers not to feelings about future successes or failures, but to the belief that such outcomes can be achieved through one's own efforts (H. Kim, 2022). Such beliefs are closely connected to meritocratic thinking, where success is attributed to individual talent and effort rather than structural advantages or disadvantages (E. Kim, 2023; Matamoros-Lima et al., 2023). Often, the perception of opportunities differs from economic reality. Research has shown that perception is more influential than actual conditions (Bjørnskov et al., 2013). This explains why beliefs such as

the American dream are still so prevalent, even in contexts where actual mobility is low (E. Kim, 2023).

Moreover, mobility can be distinguished into upward mobility (moving up the social or economic ladder) and downward mobility (falling off the ladder). Research has shown that these are separate constructs and that their relationships with other variables differ (Browman et al., 2022; Matamoros-Lima et al., 2023). However, both types of mobility perceptions decrease when inequality is salient (Browman et al., 2022). In such cases, poorer individuals lose faith in upward mobility, while wealthier individuals feel less threatened by downward mobility (Browman et al., 2022; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Matamoros-Lima et al., 2023; Melita et al., 2023). Importantly, perceived inequality affects all individuals, independent of their material or social standing (Subramanian & Kawachi, 2006).

Upward Mobility

Perceived upward mobility, the belief that one can improve their economic standing, is consistently negatively associated with support for redistribution (Alesina et al., 2018; Mérola & Helgason, 2016; Schmidt, 2011). Conversely, when people expect their chances for upward mobility to be low, support for redistributive policies increases (Alesina et al., 2018; Bjørnskov et al., 2013; Corneo & Grüner, 2002; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015).

High perceived upward mobility is often linked to meritocratic thinking, in which outcomes are attributed to individual effort and talent (E. Kim, 2023; Matamoros-Lima et al., 2023). This perspective can legitimize inequality and thereby reduce support for state intervention (Cojocaru & Diagne, 2021; Krawczyk, 2010; Weber, 2020). In contrast, when individuals believe that upward mobility depends on external factors, they tend to show greater support for state responsibility and redistribution (Krawczyk, 2010; Weber, 2020). Strong beliefs in upward mobility can also serve as a motivational mechanism for structurally disadvantaged groups (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015). However, these beliefs may also

simultaneously reduce the perceived need for government support and instead reinforce self-responsibility norms, even when structural barriers remain (Davidai, 2018).

Low perceived upward mobility is often linked to a reduced sense of control (Yoon & Kim, 2018). This loss of control can lead individuals to take more risks in an attempt to regain it (Davidai & Wienk, 2021; Melita et al., 2023). Perceived mobility is also linked to broader behavioral patterns. Those who perceive high upward mobility are more likely to be long-term oriented in their decision-making (such as engaging in responsible financial behavior) whereas those who perceive low mobility tend to be more short-term oriented and pleasure seeking (Szendrey & Fiala, 2018).

Downward Mobility

While upward mobility shapes aspirational beliefs, the perception of *downward mobility*, the fear of losing socioeconomic status, is often experienced as more emotionally and psychologically threatening. As such, downward mobility is less about motivation and more about responding to threat and uncertainty (Davidai & Wienk, 2021; Santos et al., 2017). Yet, theoretical and empirical research suggests that uncertainty may lead not only to a preference for cooperation and public support but also to fear-driven forms of self-reliance.

Pro Cooperation. Durante (2014) proposes that, alongside income maximization out of self-interest and general social concern, risk aversion plays a significant role in explaining support for redistribution. In line with this, one way to look at the possibility of falling down the economic ladder, is by its association with risk. As noted earlier, fear can foster cooperation because it is associated with risk avoidance and a motivation to seek protection (Chierchia et al., 2021). This is consistent with research suggesting that the experience of lower levels of personal control is linked to an increased support for government control (Kay et al., 2008; Santos et al., 2017). Economists have similarly argued that economic insecurities, defined as the risk of economic loss, are one of the main reasons for the rise of

welfare (Western et al., 2012). Job insecurity encompasses both the objective likelihood of losing one's job (cognitive job insecurity) and the emotional concerns about potential consequences (affective job insecurity). While some research associates job insecurity with lower support for redistribution (Anderson & Pontusson, 2007; Durante et al., 2014), other findings suggest that insecurities about the future can motivate individuals to adopt a more cooperative approach to insure oneself against negative shocks (Durante et al., 2014).

Pro Self-Reliance. One of the key explanations for individuals choosing the self-reliant options, is the expectation that others will not cooperate, rather than a strong valuation of autonomy (Gross & Böhm, 2020). In this sense, self-reliant behavior can be understood as a protective strategy when one anticipates the cooperative strategy will fail.

Research on U.S. Americans have found that in situations involving a loss of control, endorsement of meritocracy, the belief that hard work guarantees success, increases. This suggests that latching onto a belief that offers order in the distribution of success and failure, can serve as a way to cope with the threat of losing control (Goode et al., 2014; Kay et al., 2008). This suggests that focusing on how one can become successful by oneself could also be a way to deal with insecurity and offers a substitute for institutional or structural trust.

Challenging the general assumption that perceived inequality fosters cooperation, some research suggests that it is linked to reduced prosocial giving and cooperation (Davidai, 2018). Additionally, especially for individuals in lower socioeconomic positions, salient inequality promotes a lack of perceived personal control. This, in turn, can lead to ambivalence about the effectiveness of social reforms and a greater tendency to focus on self-sufficiency (Kraus et. al, 2009).

Economic Mobility, Welfare and Self-Reliance

As previously mentioned, inequality is closely linked to mobility, with countries high in inequality showing lower levels of mobility (Chetty et al., 2014; Corak, 2013; Hertel &

Groh-Samberg; OECD, 2018). While it has been suggested that national wealth inherently predicts the level of social mobility - such that wealthy countries offer higher chances of mobility - this is not always the case. Although most high-income countries show the highest level of social mobility, with the Nordic countries leading, the United States is a high-income country displaying low mobility (Muteba Mwamba et al., 2022). This indicates that wealth alone does not determine national mobility.

Instead, according to The Global Social Mobility Report, limited social protection is one of the strongest barriers to mobility (Weltwirtschaftsforum, 2020). In line with this, generous unemployment compensation has been found to profoundly reduce job insecurity, making it particularly relevant for mitigating downward mobility (Anderson & Pontusson, 2007).

Beyond the economic effect, welfare also carries psychological weight. According to the compensatory control theory, which proposes that when individuals face perceived loss of control, they seek order and predictability to limit their anxiety. Most notably, this is done by latching onto structures such as the government, law and order or even mindsets like meritocracy (Goode et al., 2014; Kay et al., 2008). In line with this reasoning, welfare systems themselves could serve as such stabilizing structures, and may be associated with a reduced insecurity and differences in attitude in regard to self-reliance.

Importantly, research indicates that the actual welfare state performance also shapes welfare attitudes, although in some contexts, higher welfare performance can paradoxically be associated with lower citizen support (Toikko & Rantanen, 2020). Taken together, welfare is not only tied to opportunities for mobility but also plays an important role in shaping how individuals evaluate collectistic or individualistic solutions.

This Present Study

The present study examines how perceptions of downward economic mobility relate to preferences for self-reliance versus cooperation. Additionally it explores whether this relationship varies by national welfare structures and how it is influenced by individual income. The guiding research question is: How does perceived downward mobility relate individuals' preferences for self-reliance? Based on previous findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Perceived downward economic mobility is negatively associated with the preference for self-reliance. Specifically:

H1a. Perceived downward mobility negatively correlates with choosing independence as an important child quality

H1b. Perceived downward mobility negatively correlates with valuing freedom over equality

H1c. perceived downward mobility positively correlates with a preference for government responsibility

H2: These associations remain significant after controlling for income. Furthermore, I will explore how the different income groups (low-income, medium-income, high-income) differ in this relationship.

H3: Higher-income individuals show a greater preference for self-reliance compared to lower-income individuals, regardless of downward mobility perceptions.

H4: Based on objective country-level indicators, countries with higher objective mobility tend to invest more into public welfare and less in self-reliant structures.

This thesis has been preregistered on the platform AsPredicted on November 30th, 2024, and can be accessed through the following link: <https://aspredicted.org/vzbk-y5tj.pdf>. It was approved by the Departmental Review Board of the Department of Occupational,

Economic and Social Psychology. The preregistration, the materials and the code of the analyses can be found on the Open Science Framework on: <https://osf.io/t3wbf/>.

Method

Participants

To capture how economic mobility and the preference for self-reliance varies across countries, the dataset for this study was drawn from the *World Values Survey Wave 7* (Haerpfer et al., 2022), which includes individual-level data from 66 countries and territories (see Table 1 in the Appendix). Data collection took place between 2017 and 2023 and involves random, probability-based representative samples of the adult population in each participating country.

In total, the original dataset includes over 90 000 participants. After cleaning the dataset from answers “Don’t know”, refused or missing answers, the final dataset consisted of 84 980 participants, of whom 47.8% were categorized as male ($n = 40,636$) and 52.1% as female ($n = 44,297$). The mean age of the participants was 44.40 years ($SD = 16.28$).

Regarding educational background, 4.9% ($n = 4,107$) of participants reported no prior education or only early childhood education. A total of 61.6% reported having attended education below the tertiary level, including primary (11.9%, $n = 10,061$), lower secondary (14.9%, $n = 12,563$), upper secondary (25.9%, $n = 21,871$), or post-secondary non-tertiary education (9%, $n = 7,642$). The remaining participants had completed short-cycle tertiary education (8.4%, $n = 7,104$), a bachelor’s degree or equivalent (17.5%, $n = 14,707$), a master’s degree or equivalent (6.6%, $n = 5,499$), or doctoral degree or equivalent (1.1%, $n = 914$).

Participation was voluntary and based on explicit oral consent, with full anonymity guaranteed. Interviews were conducted in the official or widely spoken local languages using standardized, professionally translated questionnaires. The data collection was mostly carried

out through face-to-face interviews, during which interviewers read out the questions without rephrasing or providing additional explanations.

Measures

Because the World Value Survey was not specifically designed for this paper, there were only a handful of questions fitting to the research question at hand. With this limitation in mind, three questions have been chosen to best represent self-reliance as the dependent variable and one independent variable representing downward mobility.

Dependent Variables: Self-Reliance

Three items from the *World Values Survey* were selected to represent the preference for self-reliance:

- (a) *Choosing independence as a particularly important child quality.* Participants selected five out of ten listed traits they considered most important. The analysis focused solely on whether "independence" was among the chosen traits.
- (b) *Valuing freedom over equality.* Participants indicated which of the two they prioritized.
- (c) *Believing that the individual should take more responsibility for themselves rather than the government ensuring that everyone is provided for.* This item was assessed on a 10-point scale ranging from minimal to full state responsibility.

The three indicators were chosen because they represent distinct but complementary dimensions of self-reliance. Independence and freedom, particularly the freedom of choice, reflect individualistic preferences, as those are two of the main norms of individualism (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and as such are inherently connected to self-reliance (Binder, 2019). In contrast, egalitarianism - which is the doctrine that people are all equals and ought to be treated as such - can be termed a collectivistic value (Binder, 2019; Toikko & Rantanen,

2020). On the other hand, the government responsibility item specifically addresses self-reliance in the sense of wanting no outside control, particularly by political structures.

Independent Variable: Economic Mobility

To measure the independent variable of downward mobility one question was chosen from this questionnaire, namely: *“To what degree are you worried about losing your job or not finding a job”*. Responses ranged from 1 (*not at all worried*) to 4 (*very worried*). This measurement reflects affective job insecurity representing economic insecurities and the concern about consequences of job loss.

Objective Measurements

To examine cross-country differences in the relationship between economic mobility and self-reliance, this study incorporates objective country-level indicators. For this, the most recent aggregate values (collected between 2022 and 2023) of intergenerational income elasticity (Development Research Group, 2023; Van Der Weide et al., 2024) and the Global Social Mobility Index (Weltwirtschaftsforum, 2020) were used to measure economic mobility. The Global Social Mobility Index looks at five key dimensions that are relevant for social mobility, which include: Health, education, technology, work, and protection and institutions. On the other hand, intergenerational income elasticity measures the degree in which economic status is transmitted across generations.

Self-reliance at the country-level was assessed through social spending measures, by operationalizing separate measures of private and public social spending, as well as their ratio, using data from the OECD Social Expenditure Database (SOCX) (OECD, n.d.-a). According to the OECD, social spending includes “cash benefits, direct in-kind provision of goods and services, and tax breaks with social purposes”. Furthermore, spending is classified as public if it is funded by the government. Importantly, private trades and transfers between households are not considered private in this framework (OECD, n.d.-b)

As not all countries had results in all measures, only countries with sufficient data coverage across all indicators were analyzed ($N = 25$, see Table 2 in the Appendix).

Exploratory

Following the assumption that higher levels of economic mobility are positively associated with greater governmental assistance, this thesis furthermore aims to explore whether welfare systems moderate the link between the perceived downward mobility and individual preference for self-reliance. For this, this study incorporated the Social Protection dimension of the Global Social Mobility Index 2020 (Weltwirtschaftsforum, 2020), which includes measures such as guaranteed minimum income benefits (% of median income), coverage rates (% of population), social protection spending (% of GDP) and the strength of social safety net protection (1-7).

Because of data availability, only 41 countries from the World Value Survey sample were included in this exploratory analysis ($N = 57\,712$; see Table 3).

Data Analyses

To analyze the relationship between perceived economic mobility and self-reliance, several analyses were conducted in R, with the help of multiple packages.

To prepare the data, the three measures of self-reliance were recoded to ensure consistent directionality, with higher values indicating greater self-reliance. The binary measure of independence as an important child quality was coded as 1 (independence important) and 0 (not important). The freedom versus equality item was coded as 1 (freedom) and 0 (equality). The government responsibility scale (1-10) was maintained, with higher values indicating stronger preference for individual responsibility. Given the hierarchical nature of the data with individuals nested within countries, multilevel models were estimated for all hypotheses to account for both individual-level predictors and country-level variability. Following a structured approach, a null model was first calculated to assess clustering. Next,

random intercept models were estimated and further compared to random slopes models, when statistically feasible. Random slopes model extended the findings by allowing both the intercepts and slopes to differ to account for between-country variance in the association between job fear and self-reliance. This provided a test of hypothesis 1, namely whether fear of job loss is associated with a preference for self-reliance. To address hypothesis 2, all multilevel analyses were re-done with income as a covariate. In addition, participants were categorized into low-, medium-, and high-income groups (as defined in the WVS dataset), and separate multilevel models were run for each group to assess how the association differs by income. Hypothesis 3 was examined separately using a chi-square test and an effect size calculation, as it concerned the association between income and self-reliance preference, apart from its association with fear.

Additional control variables were included to explore the robustness of the findings. In line with other research (Alesina et al., 2018; Corneo & Grüner, 2002; Davidai & Gilovich, 2018; Valdimarsdóttir, 2010) this included: Age, gender, political stance, general trust in others and perceived corruption in the country. Because of missing data on these variables, the sample for models including control variables was reduced to 63 271 participants.

For hypothesis 4, cross-country associations between mobility and investments into social welfare were examined using a correlation matrix.

Finally, to explore the moderating role of the welfare system, the multilevel models were extended by including the country social protection score as a continuous moderator variable (ranging from 20.9 to 85.4 out of 100). Due to convergence issues in the multilevel models, the variables were standardized ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$) to improve model stability. Because all of the other calculations were not standardized, comparisons between the models with and without inclusion of welfare should be interpreted with caution.

Results

Factor analysis and correlations were conducted to examine whether these three measures represented a unified construct of self-reliance. Results revealed extremely low correlations between the measures: independence and government responsibility ($r = .018$), independence and equality preference ($r = .010$), and government responsibility and equality preference ($r = .033$). The factor analysis with a one-factor solution yielded low factor loadings (.07, .25, and .14) and high uniqueness values (0.99, 0.94, and 0.98), indicating that 94–99% of the variance in each measure was unique. Overall, the factor accounted for only 3% of the total variance, confirming that the items capture distinct aspects of self-reliance rather than a unified construct. Consequently, they were analyzed separately rather than combined into a composite score.

Description of Analyses

Descriptive analyses of the main variables revealed distinct patterns in their distributions. For independence as an important child quality (Q8), 43.2% of respondents considered it important ($n = 36,690$), while 56.8% did not ($n = 48,290$) with a mean of 0.43 ($SD = 0.50$). Similarly, when choosing between freedom and equality (Q149), 56.5% of respondents favored freedom ($n = 47,978$), while 43.5% ($n = 37,002$) prioritized equality ($M = 0.56$, $SD = 0.50$). The government responsibility scale (Q108), ranging from 1 (government should take full responsibility) to 10 (individual should take full responsibility), exhibited pronounced peaks at both extremes and the middle ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 3.01$). Notably, 20% of respondents strongly favored government responsibility ($n = 16,980$), while 11.7% strongly preferred individual responsibility ($n = 9,916$). The middle range (scores 4-7) showed relatively consistent proportions (7.7-15.8%), suggesting polarized views on this dimension.

The fear of job loss measure, used as an indicator for perceived downward economic mobility, showed a decreasing distribution. While 17.8% ($n = 15,090$) of respondents

reported no worry at all, 36.5% ($n = 31,026$) expressed high levels of concern. The intermediate categories captured 20.1% and 25.6% of respondents, resulting in a skew toward higher levels of worry in regards to job loss ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.11$).

When looking at the differences in income, most respondents positioned themselves in the middle (steps 4-7, 65%, $n = 55,210$), while 24.6% ($n = 20,831$) considered themselves part of the low (steps 1-3) and 10.4% ($n = 8,939$) the high income group (steps 8-10). The distribution was somewhat skewed, with notably more respondents in the middle-income categories compared to the extremes ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 2.07$).

H1 Results

As previously mentioned, my first hypothesis suggests that perceived downward mobility negatively predicts self-reliance and in this sense negatively correlates with choosing independence as an important child quality (H1a), preferring freedom over equality (H1b) and putting more responsibility on the individual instead of the government (H1c). The following outcomes are also represented in table 4-6 within the appendix, with an additional coefficient plot combining all three measures (Figure 4 in the appendix).

H1a. Independence

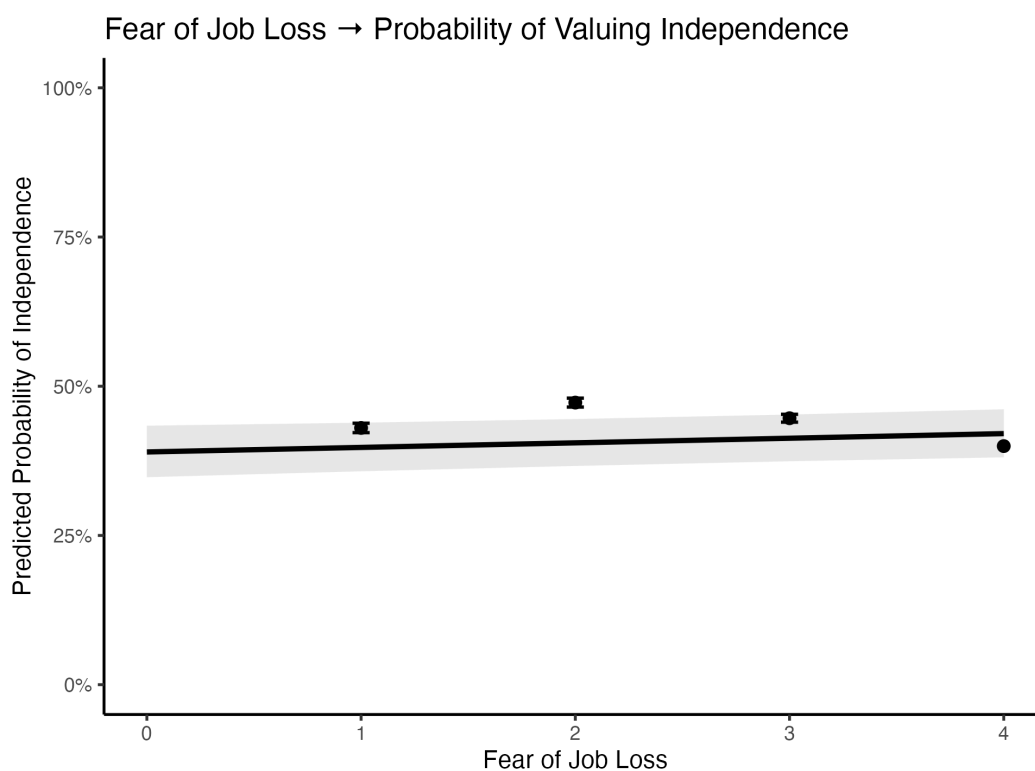
A multilevel logistic regression model was conducted to examine the relationship between job-related fear and the likelihood of perceiving independence as important. The null model revealed a country-level variance of 0.42 ($SD = 0.65$) and an intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of 11.4%, indicating that country differences accounted for a considerable portion of the variance in independence preferences. Model fit comparisons indicated that the random slopes model ($AIC = 1079.20$) fit the data better than the random intercept model ($AIC = 1081.00$), and thus was selected as the final model.

In the final model, there was significant variation both in baseline preference for independence ($\sigma^2 = 0.51$, $SD = 0.72$), as well as in the association between job-related fear

and independence across countries ($\sigma^2 = 0.11$, $SD = 0.10$). Regarding fixed effects, job-related fear was significantly associated with the likelihood of perceiving independence as important, $B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $z = 2.11$, $p = .04$. Although the effect size was relatively small ($OR = 1.03$), higher levels of job-related fear were associated with a greater likelihood of perceiving independence as important, contrary to the initial hypothesis.

Figure 1

Predicted probability of endorsing independence as a function of fear of job loss



Note. Estimates from a logistic mixed-effects model with random intercepts and slopes by country. The line shows the fixed effect with 95% confidence interval; dots indicate observed proportions (0 = no independence, 1 = independence).

H1b. Freedom versus Equality

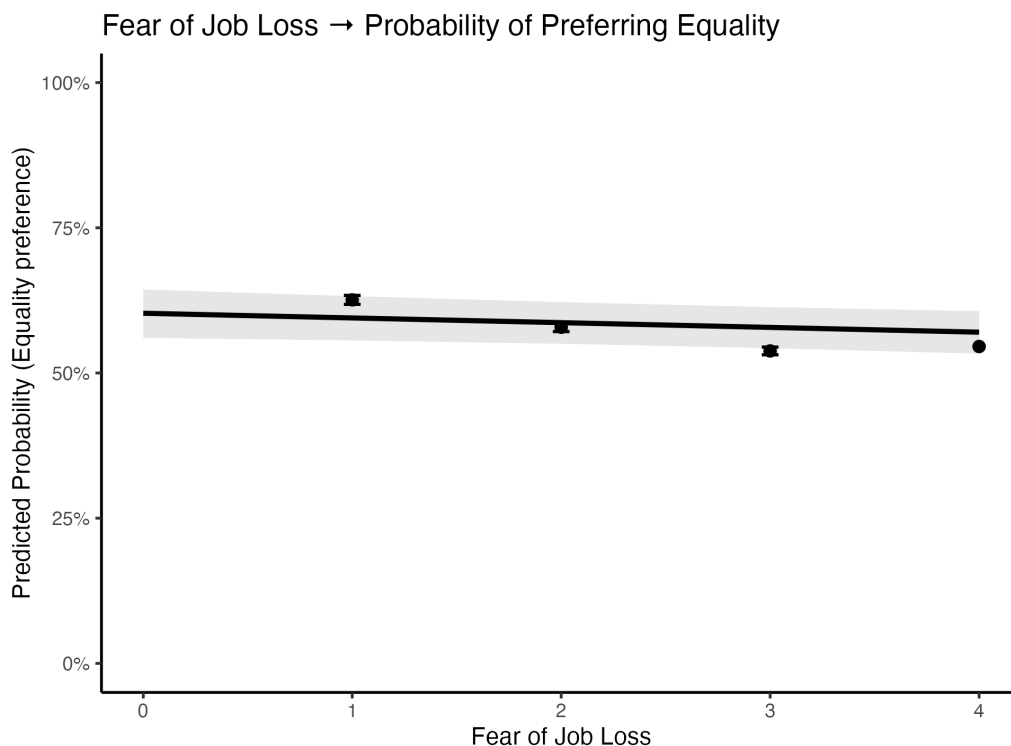
Regarding the preference for freedom versus equality, another multilevel logistic regression model was conducted to examine the relationship with downward economic mobility. The null model revealed country-level-variance ($\sigma^2 = 0.364$, $SD = 0.603$, $ICC =$

9.9%), suggesting that around 10% of the variance of the preference for freedom over equality is due to differences between countries. Again the random slopes model showed better model fit than the random intercept model ($AIC = 109274.8$ vs. $AIC = 109443.8$).

The analysis revealed variation in both the country-level baseline freedom preference ($\sigma^2 = 0.470$) and in the relationship between job fear and freedom preferences across countries ($\sigma^2 = 0.014$). Job-related fear was found to significantly correlate with the preference for equality over freedom ($B = -0.0336$, $SE = 0.017$, $z = -1.989$, $p = .047$, $OR = 0.967$). This suggests that individuals with higher levels of job-related fear are slightly more likely to value equality over freedom, which fits to the hypothesis.

Figure 2

Predicted probability of endorsing equality as a function of fear of job loss



Note. Estimates from a logistic mixed-effects model with random intercepts and slopes by country. The line shows the fixed effect with 95% confidence interval; dots indicate observed proportions (0 = no equality, 1 = equality).

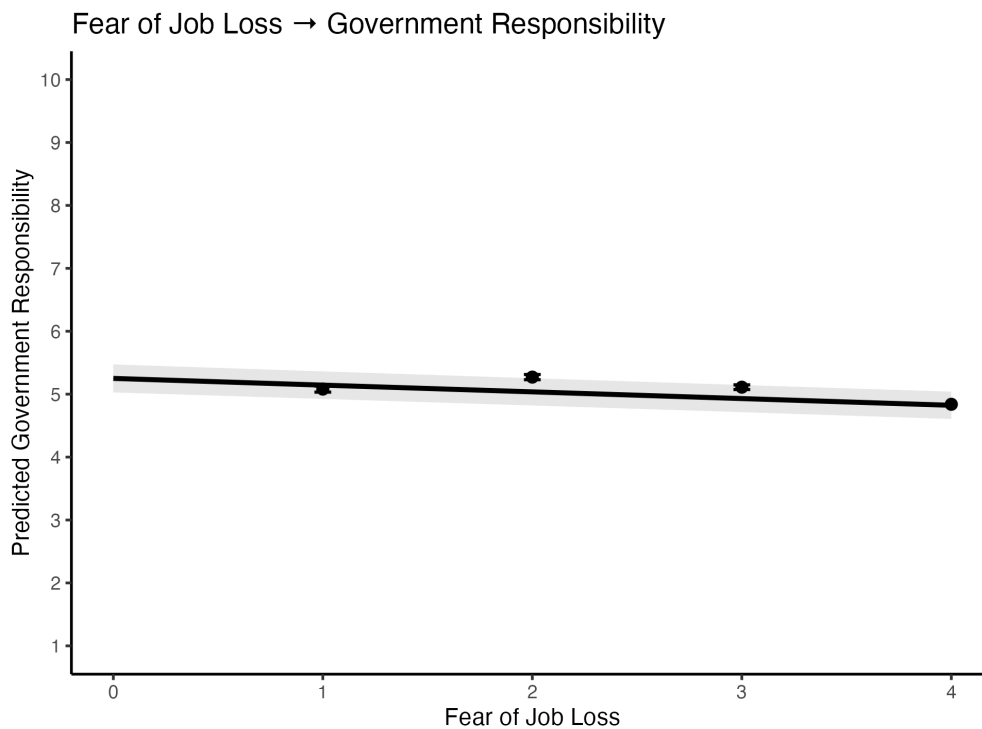
H1c. Government/Individual Responsibility

To analyse the relationship between perceived downward economic mobility and government responsibility, a correlation and a multilevel linear regression were conducted. The null model revealed significant country-level variance ($\sigma^2 = 0.76$, $SD = 0.87$) with the ICC indicating that 8.32% of the variance in regards to government responsibility can be explained by differences between countries.

While the initial correlation showed a negligible relationship ($r(84,978) = -.040$, $p < .001$) between government responsibility and fear of job loss, the multilevel analysis with random intercepts revealed a more substantial effect when accounting for country-level clustering ($B = -0.11$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(84,975) = -10.82$, $p < .001$). The negative coefficients indicate that an increase in job fear is associated with a stronger preference for government responsibility compared to individuals responsibility. Although the effect size was minimal ($d = -0.04$), the outcome is as the hypothesis suggested. Finally, the analysis also revealed a slight baseline tendency toward the middle with country-level variation ($B = 5.25$, $\sigma^2 = 0.765$, $SD = 0.874$). Attempts to fit a random slopes model did not converge.

Figure 3

Predicted government responsibility as a function of fear of job loss.



Note. Estimates from a linear mixed-effects model with random intercepts by country. The line shows the fixed effect with 95% confidence interval; dots indicate observed means (1 = government, 10 = individual responsibility).

H2 Results

As previously mentioned, the second hypothesis predicts that the relationships between downward mobility and all self-reliance measurements remain significant after controlling for individual income. To examine the robustness of the relationship between job-related fear and the self-reliance values, income was added as a control variable to the multilevel regression models. Furthermore, in this section, additional controls were integrated and income groups were compared in relation to its association with fear of job loss (see appendix table 7-15).

H2a. Income Control on Fear of Job loss and Independence Preference

The model maintained its hierarchical structure with country-level random intercepts. Results showed that the link of job-related fear and independence remained significant, $B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.007$, $z = 4.07$, $p < .001$, $OR = 1.03$, when controlling for income, supporting hypothesis 2a. Income itself emerged as a significant positive predictor ($B = 0.025$, $SE = 0.004$, $z = 6.97$, $p < .001$, $OR = 1.026$), indicating that individuals with higher income levels were more likely to value independence, also making the intercept more negative compared to the original model.

When comparing income groups, this association is strongest amongst low-income individuals ($B = 0.047$) and becomes progressively weaker in the medium-income group ($B = 0.025$), and eventually disappears among high-income individuals ($B = -0.005$). This pattern suggests that the direct association of economic insecurity and independence values diminishes as economic resources increase (Table 8).

Incorporating other control variables, fear of job loss ($B = -0.0006$, $SE = 0.012$, $z = -0.05$, $p = .96$) and income both became insignificant. On the other hand, higher education, left political orientation, younger age, and being female were all significantly associated with independence values (Table 9).

H2b. Income Control on Fear of Job Loss and Preference of Freedom/Equality

For the freedom versus equality preference, results also supported the hypothesis as the association with job-related fear remained significant and relatively stable ($B = -0.036$, $SE = 0.007$, $z = 4.99$, $p < .001$). Income itself emerged as a significant positive predictor ($B = 0.013$, $SE = 0.004$, $z = 3.49$, $p < .001$) (see Table 10).

Further models showed that fear and job loss consistently predicted preferences for equality over freedom across all income groups, though with varying strength. Low-income individuals show the strongest negative relationship ($B = -0.065$), indicating that higher fear is associated with stronger preferences for equality. This relationship remains significant but

weakens for the medium-income group ($B = -0.025$), but maintains similar strength in the high-income group ($B = -0.053$), suggesting that the weakest association was among those with medium income (Table 11).

When accounting for other demographics, the connection of fear of job loss and the preference of freedom became non-significant ($B = -0.005$, $SE = 0.013$, $z = -0.361$, $p = .71$). Instead, higher income, being male, right political orientation, older and trusting others more were all associated with preferring freedom (Table 12).

H2c. Income Control on Fear of Job Loss and Government/Individual Responsibility

When controlling for income, the association between job-related fear and the preference of government responsibility remained significant and negative, though weaker than in the first model ($B = -0.09$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(84,975) = -8.91$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -0.03$). Still, the hypothesis H2 can be supported. Income emerged as a significant positive predictor ($B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.005$, $t(84,975) = 29.936$, $p < .001$), indicating that individuals with higher income levels were more likely to favor individual over government responsibility ($d = 0.05$). The model's intercept decreased substantially (from $B = 5.25$ to $B = 4.46$, $SE = 0.115$, $t = 38.78$), suggesting a portion of the preference for individual responsibility could be explained by income levels (Table 13).

Group comparisons revealed that low-income individuals showed a significant negative relationship between fear of job loss and government responsibility ($B = -0.07$), which became stronger among medium-income individuals ($B = -0.10$), and weaker again among high-income individuals ($B = -0.07$) (see Table 14). Notably, the baseline preference for individual responsibility (intercept) increases with income level ($4.69 \rightarrow 5.33 \rightarrow 5.65$).

Including more control variables, fear of job loss remained significantly associated with greater support for governmental responsibility ($B = -0.043$, $SE = 0.007$, $t = -5.670$, $p < .001$). Higher income, being male, older, right political orientation, higher education were

associated with stronger preference for individual responsibility. Surprisingly, the perception of corruption is associated with favoring government responsibility (Table 15).

H3 Results

The third hypothesis predicted that individuals with higher income prefer self-reliance, meaning they value independence as a child-quality more, prefer freedom over equality and show lower preference for government responsibility compared to low income individuals.

H3a. Income Differences on Independence Preference

Analysis revealed a statistically significant but practically negligible association between income group and independence preference ($\chi^2(2) = 29.177, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.02$). The small effect size indicates that the income membership explains very little, with a very similar distribution in regards to valuing independence (low income: 42%, middle: 43%, high: 45%). These findings align with the weak point-biserial correlation ($r = -.027$) between the continuous income measure and independence preference, further confirming the weak relationship.

H3b. Income Differences on Freedom/Equality Preference

A similar pattern emerged when examining preferences for equality versus freedom across income groups using the same analyses. While chi-square testing showed statistical significance ($\chi^2(2) = 79.511, p < .001$), the effect size remained minimal (Cramer's $V = 0.03$). Again this fits to the weak biserial correlation between income and this preference ($r = -.031$). The proportional distribution revealed a slight trend: as income increased, preference for freedom over equality showed a modest increase (Low Income: 54.79%; Middle Income: 56.47%; High Income: 60.49%).

H3c. Income Differences on Government Preference

To analyse the relationship between income and the attitudes toward government responsibility, a Kruskal-Wallis test, pairwise comparisons, and effect size calculations were conducted. Results showed significant group differences ($\chi^2(2) = 881.75, p < .001$). Looking at differences in distributions, an increase in mean scores across the income groups was noticeable. Low-income respondents ($M = 4.57, SD = 3.17$) showed the lowest preference for individual responsibility, followed by middle-income respondents ($M = 5.13, SD = 2.91$), whereas high-income respondents demonstrated the strongest preference for individual responsibility ($M = 5.56, SD = 3.10$).

Effect size calculations using Cohen's d revealed that while all differences between groups were statistically significant, the extent of these differences varied. The most substantial difference was observed between low and high-income groups ($d = -0.32$), indicating a small but meaningful effect. Comparisons between low and middle-income groups ($d = -0.19$) and middle and high-income groups ($d = -0.15$) yielded negligible effects, despite their statistical significance. The consistently negative effect sizes indicate that higher income groups showed stronger preferences for individual responsibility over government intervention.

H4 Objective Measurement Results

In the case of the objective country findings in regards to the connection of mobility and investments into social welfare the correlation matrix showed interesting connections (see Figure 1). To statistically evaluate these associations, Pearson correlation tests were conducted.

The two mobility indicators capture different perspectives, as evidenced by their strong negative correlation ($r(23) = -.53, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.76, -.16] p = .007$). This result confirms that a higher GSM index indicates better social mobility, while higher intergenerational

income elasticity reflects lower mobility (i.e., stronger income persistence across generations).

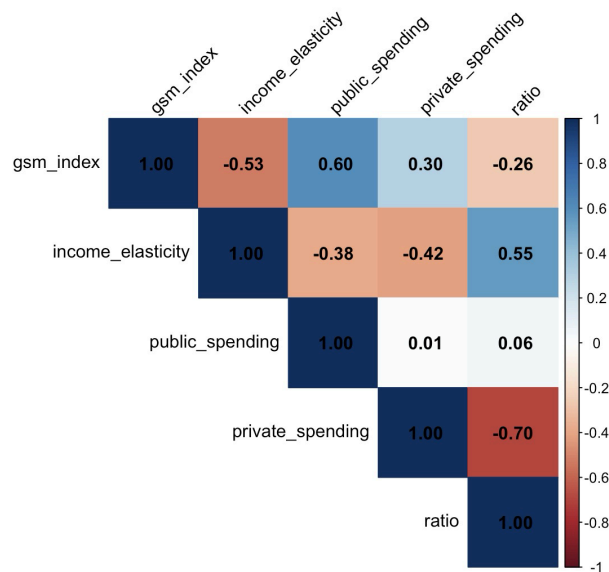
The three welfare measurements revealed very interesting observations in relation to their correlations with the mobility measurements. Public social spending was positively correlated with the GSM Index ($r(23) = .60$, 95% CI [.27, .80], $p = .002$), suggesting that countries with greater social welfare tend to exhibit higher social mobility. Conversely, income elasticity was negatively (though marginally) correlated with public spending, $r(23) = -.38$, 95% CI [-.67, .02], $p = .060$, indicating a tendency for greater public spending to be linked with lower income persistence across generations. Private spending showed weaker connections. Its correlation with the GSM Index was small and nonsignificant, $r(23) = .30$, 95% CI [-.10, .62], $p = .14$, while its negative association with income elasticity was statistically significant, $r(23) = -.42$, 95% CI [-.70, -.03], $p = .038$.

Unexpected findings emerged regarding the ratio of private to public spending. The ratio negatively correlated with the GSM index, $r(23) = -.26$, 95% CI [-.59, .15], $p = .21$, but positively correlated with income elasticity, $r(23) = .55$, 95% CI [.20, .78], $p = .004$. These opposing directions, compared to the individual spending measures, likely stem from the fact that very low private spending values can disproportionately inflate the ratio, highlighting its limitations as a standalone indicator of self-reliance.

Overall, the results suggest that public social spending is the most consistent predictor of higher mobility and less income persistence, whereas private spending and the public-to-private ratio show weaker or inconsistent associations.

Figure 5

Correlation matrix of economic mobility and welfare indicators



Exploratory Results: The Influence of Countries Welfare Systems

As there was considerable between-country variance in all outcome measures, it was of interest to examine whether the same associations varied depending on welfare protection levels. Because of this the multilevel regressions were extended to include social protection scores and direct comparisons for the income groups can be found in Table 16-18 in the appendix.

Fear of Job Loss and Independence

Exploratory analysis including welfare protection confirmed the notion that individuals experiencing job insecurity were more likely to value independence ($\beta = 0.05$, $SE = 0.010$, $z = 4.52$, $p < .001$). This relationship was strongest in the low-income ($\beta = 0.08$) and medium-income ($\beta = 0.04$) groups. Although welfare was not associated with the valuation of independence, the protection scores significantly moderated the fear-independence relationship ($\beta = -0.02$, $SE = 0.010$, $z = -2.23$, $p = .026$), suggesting that the relationship between fear and independence valuation weakens in high-protection countries. Furthermore, all relations remained significant when controlling for income.

When analyzed by income group, welfare was only significant for high income individuals ($\beta = 0.194$, $SE = 0.094$, $p = .038$) and marginally for medium-income. Moderation effects emerged for both the medium-income group ($\beta = -0.025$) as well as the high-income group ($\beta = -0.059$, $SE = 0.028$, $p = .038$).

Fear of Job Loss and Freedom versus Equality

Exploratory analyses revealed that fear of job loss was associated with a lower preference for freedom ($\beta = -0.06$, $SE = 0.010$, $z = -6.5$, $p < .001$) even when welfare was accounted for. Whereas higher welfare protection strongly predicted the preference for freedom ($\beta = 0.311$, $SE = 0.08$, $z = 4.14$, $p < .001$), the negative interaction ($\beta = -0.07$, $SE = 0.010$, $z = -7.4$, $p < .001$) indicated that social protection strengthens the relationship between fear and the preference for equality. All three associations were also preserved when income was included.

Across all income groups, fear of job loss was associated with a stronger preference for equality, with the relationship being most pronounced in the low-income group ($\beta = -0.085$) and followed by the medium-income group ($\beta = -0.057$). Welfare protection positively influenced all groups (Low: $\beta = 0.23$, Medium: $\beta = 0.35$, High: $\beta = 0.29$; all $p < 0.01$), meaning that individuals, independent of their economic status, were more inclined to prefer freedom over equality when welfare provision was stronger. In addition, the interaction was significant in every group, indicating that welfare amplified the fear-equality link. The effect was strongest among high-income individuals ($\beta = -0.081$), followed by medium-income ($\beta = -0.075$) and, to a smaller extent, low-income individuals ($\beta = -0.049$).

Fear of Job Loss and Government Responsibility

Exploratory analyses including welfare protection revealed the persistent association between the fear of job loss and preference for government responsibility ($\beta = -0.157$, $SE =$

0.013, $t = -11.79$, $p < .001$) which could be observed across all income groups, but was least pronounced in the low-income group.

While welfare protection alone showed no significant effect, it significantly moderated the fear-government responsibility association ($\beta = -0.047$, $SE = 0.014$, $t = -3.46$, $p < .001$). This suggests that in high-protection countries the link between fear and wanting more government responsibility was stronger compared to those countries with less welfare. The interaction with welfare protection was present for low-income ($\beta = -0.061$) and medium-income ($\beta = -0.050$), but not for high-income individuals. All existing relations remained significant after controlling for income, which by itself was a strong predictor of individual responsibility ($\beta = 0.154$, $SE = 0.006$, $t = 26.06$, $p < .001$).

Further analysis of income groups through a Kruskal-Wallis test revealed significant differences in government responsibility preferences across income levels ($\chi^2(2) = 662.9$, $p < .001$). Effect size analyses showed small differences between low and high income groups ($d = -0.328$) and low and middle income groups ($d = -0.202$), while the difference between middle and high income groups was negligible ($d = -0.145$).

Discussion

This research aimed to investigate whether the perception of economic mobility is associated with the preference for self-reliance, specifically the valuation of independence, the preference of freedom over equality as well as the preference for individual over government responsibility. All three measurements showed substantial variance in the specific preference due to country differences as well as in their association with fear of job loss, underlying the importance of the multilevel analyses. Bringing together our findings across the three measurements reveals that they do not represent the same construct and show variable responses to downward mobility, which is why the results will be discussed separately in the later part of this discussion.

In general it can be said that perceived downward mobility was associated with a less self-reliant and instead more cooperative approach in regards to the preference of equality over freedom and the desire for governmental responsibility. On the other hand, independence as a child quality was found to be associated with more importance when fear was high. This specific finding challenges the general perception that fear is often linked to more cooperative preferences. I suggest that these responses are complementary rather than contradictory: Whereas equality and governmental responsibility represent ideologies and offer institutional protection against threats, independence represents personal agency in managing these same threats. In this way, rather than solely relying on oneself in terms of autonomy (independence, freedom and individual responsibility), fearful individuals try to combine autonomy as well as provide security by their surroundings (dependence, equality, governmental responsibility).

Furthermore, as the objective measurements of public spending and general mobility was positively associated, meaning that the countries higher social spending was associated with higher mobility, the exploratory analysis of the moderation effects of welfare on the relationship was warranted. With this in mind, the overall pattern of the findings are that welfare generally strengthens the relationship between fear and preferring less-reliant options. Furthermore, the moderation effect is often strongest for medium-income groups rather than low-income groups, suggesting that they often feel a bigger necessity to still rely on themselves. This fear-driven self-reliance suggests that psychological responses to insecurity may not be easily offset by institutional safeguards alone.

Valuation of Independence

Association between Fear and Independence Valuation

Contrary to expectations, individuals who experienced greater fear of job loss were more likely to prioritize independence. This finding suggests that under conditions of

insecurity, such as downward mobility, independence gains in importance, possibly to regain a sense of control. Importantly, just as compensatory theory can be associated with latching onto existing external systems (law and order or the government) in times of threat, research has also shown that the same mechanism is at work with beliefs that could lead to more self-reliance. Research by Goode and colleagues (2014) found that endorsement of meritocracy - the belief that only hard work and ability promise success - increases under insecurity. In this way, the endorsement of independence may function as a psychological buffer in times of uncertainty. Interestingly, the baseline importance of independence was lower than anticipated by previous literature, suggesting that while independence is not strongly valued overall, fear may still foster self-reliant preferences.

When accounting for country-level welfare protection, the positive association of fear of job loss and the valuation of independence remained significant. Unexpectedly, higher values of protection were not associated with greater independence valuation. Most notably, however, protection levels moderated the fear-independence relationship, weakening the effect in stronger welfare systems, fitting to the compensatory theory in the general sense.

In conclusion, the compensatory theory explains both tendencies of individuals in regards to the valuation of independence: Valuing independence in times of fear can help individuals regain control, but this fear-driven self-reliance may be limited when individuals know they can rely on institutional structures instead.

Influence of Income and other Demographics

As proposed in the second hypothesis, the association of fear and the valuation of independence across all income groups was stable, although slightly lowered when controls were included. This suggests that fear of job loss is associated with an increased endorsement of independence regardless of income level.

Still, income emerged as a predictor of higher independence valuation, generally indicating that individuals with more resources are more likely to place greater importance on independence. This aligns with broader findings in social psychology suggesting that socioeconomic status is often associated with stronger individualistic orientations (Kraus et al., 2012).

Unexpectedly, however, the fear-independence link was strongest among low-income individuals and weakened with income. Notably, specifically for low-income individuals, this link persisted even in countries with good welfare systems as it had no influence. This suggests that fear-driven self-reliance may endure despite available safety nets. This finding challenges assumptions that lower SES individuals necessarily prefer collective solutions, highlighting instead a potentially overlooked compensatory mechanism for existential fear. Mérola and Helgason (2016) support this interpretation as they found that when imagining equal income growth (i.e., unchanged ranks), wealthier individuals were more willing to support redistribution taxes than poorer ones. They argued that shared gains do not spark a desire for equality and a feeling of “we-ness” as it does for wealthier individuals. Overall, these results suggest that promoting collective action and a feeling of “we-ness” may require more than just welfare provision for this group.

In contrast, for medium-income individuals, welfare protection reduced the impact of fear, indicating that institutional support helps lessen the fear-driven self-reliance for this group. Welfare seemed to carry the most importance for high-income individuals as it increased independence values as well as weakened the fear-independence link, indicating that in wealthier groups institutional provisions may both promote individualistic orientations and mitigate fear-driven self-reliance.

When including control variables, the fear of job loss as well as income became non-significant, suggesting that demographics might affect the importance of independence

more than the situational fear or resources alone. Specifically, whereas higher education was associated with more importance of independence, right political orientation, older age and being male all negatively predicted the valuation of independence.

Preference of Freedom vs. Equality

Association between Fear and Freedom vs. Equality preference

As hypothesized, the experience of fear of job loss was associated with a shift toward equality, implying that insecurities lead to higher valuation of collectivistic values. At the same time, country-level protection further represented an important predictor for the preference of freedom, as higher levels of protections were associated with a stronger preference. This pattern suggests that when institutional safety nets are offered, individuals may feel secure enough to value freedom more. Importantly, however, the interaction between the welfare state and fear was negative, indicating that institutional protection amplifies the psychological impact of fear on collectivist preferences.

Influence of Income and other Demographical Variables

As hypothesized, this relationship was not dependent on income, although individuals with higher income levels were more likely to value freedom. In general, the preference for freedom showed a slight increase with increasing income. When welfare was not included in the analysis, the fear-equality relationship was strongest for low-income individuals, followed by high and lastly by medium-income individuals. This suggests that the preference for equality over freedom shifted most strongly among those who were both fearful and economically disadvantaged. Interestingly, when welfare was included, the effect for high-income individuals became non-significant, suggesting that welfare may be particularly influential for this group. Furthermore, welfare protection and its moderating effects explained the preference for freedom most in medium- and high-income individuals, and

lowest for low-income individuals, again suggesting that welfare has surprisingly little influence on self-reliance for those with little resources.

As for control variables, being male, more conservative, older or trusting others were all associated with generally preferring freedom to equality. Due to the substantial influence by these variables, the association of fear of job loss and the preference of equality became non-significant, but income stayed a significant predictor.

Preference for Individual vs. Governmental Responsibility

Association between Fear and Independence Valuation

As hypothesized, individuals experiencing higher levels of fear of job loss were more likely to prefer governmental responsibility over individual responsibility. The baseline tendency was relatively balanced, although this varied considerably between countries as well as individuals. Including country-level welfare protection revealed no significant main effect, but significantly moderated the effect of fear. Specifically it suggests that the effect of fear on the preference of governmental responsibility is amplified when institutional protection is strong.

Influence of Income and other Demographical Variables

Income emerged as a significant positive predictor, indicating that individuals with higher income levels were slightly more likely to favor individual over government responsibility. At the same time, part of the relationship between job-related fear and government responsibility preferences was attributable to income differences, as the effect-size decreased significantly ($d = -0.037$ to $d = -0.0304$). This indicates that income explains some of the preference.

Specifically comparing income groups further showed that the baseline preference for individual responsibility increased with income. Across all groups, fear of job loss was associated with a preference for governmental responsibility, though this effect was much

stronger amongst medium-income individuals compared to low- and high-income individuals. When accounting for welfare, however, the pattern shifted: The effect of fear was strongest among low-income individuals, followed by medium-income, while it became non-significant for high-income individuals. This again, highlights the surprisingly big influence that welfare holds for the individuals that have the least material need for it. Additionally, welfare moderated this association particularly for low-income individuals, as its moderation was almost twice as big as for individuals with more income, suggesting that the combination of fear and low-income had the strongest effect on more want for governmental responsibility.

Even after including further control variables, higher income still persisted as an extremely stable predictor for a higher desire for individual responsibility, as well as fear of job loss being associated with more want for governmental responsibility. Older age, more conservative tendencies and being male were all associated with a higher wish for individual responsibility. On the other hand, counterintuitively, the perception of corruption was associated with favoring government responsibility.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge that this study has several limitations. First, direct comparison of results should be done with caution. Three different datasets were used for the individual-level analyses (general findings, findings with control variables, and findings with external welfare variables), with the adapted versions excluding different respondents depending on missing data or country coverage. Additionally, the use of both standardized and non-standardized coefficients in different analyses prevents direct comparison between general findings and those including welfare variables. Together, these issues limit the possibility of overarching interpretations, and future research should aim to standardize analyses for more robust exploration of the welfare system. Secondly, the three measurements

chosen to represent self-reliance showed low correlations with each other, limiting the validity in regards to their interpretation on self-reliance. Additionally, the questions were formulated in an open-ended way, and as such their meaning could have been interpreted very differently depending on respondents. For example, the question asking participants to choose between “freedom” and “equality” offered no definitions for these constructs, potentially introducing ambiguity. Third, the measure of independence as a child quality was constrained by the survey’s forced-choice format, allowing respondents to select only five qualities from a list of ten. This design may have limited variation and influenced outcomes, especially if other qualities were prioritized for cultural or personal reasons (such as manners, hard work, feeling of responsibility, tolerance, etc). This limitation could help explain the tendency for this question in the general findings and in its relation to the control variables to differ so greatly to the other indicators.

Importantly, the analyses rely on cross-sectional survey data and as such, causal interpretations cannot be drawn. Future studies could address causality by employing experimental designs such as using public-private good games in which economic insecurity and/or welfare provision is manipulated. Longitudinal designs tracking changes in job security could likewise clarify whether insecurity *causes* shifts toward independence or collectivism.

Conclusion

This research investigated how perceived economic mobility and fear of job loss are associated with the preference for self-reliance, including the valuation of independence, preference for freedom over equality, and the desire for individual over governmental responsibility. Generally, fear of downward mobility fosters more collectivistic attitudes, such as favoring equality and governmental responsibility. However, independence as a child quality was valued more under fear, especially among low-income individuals, suggesting

fear-driven self-reliance serves as a psychological coping mechanism. Income emerged as a key predictor across all measures, with higher income linked to stronger self-reliance - particularly a preference for freedom and individual responsibility - though it didn't explain the association of fear with the income groups. Additionally, welfare systems moderated the association with fear, amplifying collectivistic preferences like equality and governmental responsibility, especially for medium-income groups, while buffering fear-driven independence. Notably, even with strong welfare structures, low-income individuals displayed heightened independence under fear, highlighting limits of institutional protection in offsetting psychological insecurity. Overall, these findings highlight the complex interplay between structural welfare, demographics, and fear in shaping self-reliance attitudes.

Artificial Intelligence and Open Science Statement

The author of this thesis acknowledges the use of artificial intelligence tools, specifically ChatGPT and Perplexity, for rephrasing text and generating R-Code. Perplexity and Elicit were also employed in the initial literature search and contributed to the development of the hypotheses. In addition, Scribbr was used for generating references.

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Appendix

Table 1

Countries from the World Value Survey

Andorra	Germany	Nigeria	Taiwan ROC
Argentina	Great Britain	Northern Ireland	Tajikistan
Armenia	Greece	Pakistan	Thailand
Australia	Guatemala	Peru	Tunisia
Bangladesh	Hong Kong SAR	Philippines	Turkey
Bolivia	India	Puerto Rico	Ukraine
Brazil	Indonesia	Romania	United States
Canada	Iran	Russia	Uruguay
Chile	Iraq	Serbia	Uzbekistan
China	Japan	Singapore	Venezuela
Colombia	Jordan	Slovakia	Vietnam
Cyprus	Kazakhstan	South Korea	Zimbabwe
Czech Republic	Kenya	Macau SAR	
Ecuador	Kyrgyzstan	Malaysia	
Egypt	Lebanon	Maldives	
Ethiopia	Libya	Mexico	
Netherlands	Mongolia	Morocco	
Myanmar	Nicaragua	New Zealand	

Table 2*Countries analysed in the objective measurements*

Australia	Finland	Mexico	Sweden
Austria	France	Netherlands	Switzerland
Canada	Germany	New Zealand	United Kingdom
Chile	Greece	Norway	USA
Colombia	Hungary	Poland	
Czech Republic	Italy	Slovakia	
Denmark	Japan	Spain	

Table 3*Countries analysed in the exploratory research*

Argentina	Czech Republic	Kazakhstan	Romania
Armenia	Germany	South Korea	Russia
Australia	Ecuador	Morocco	Singapore
Bangladesh	Egypt	Mexico	Serbia
Brazil	Great Britain	Malaysia	Slovakia
Canada	Greece	Netherlands	Thailand
Chile	Guatemala	New Zealand	Tunisia
China	Indonesia	Pakistan	Turkey
Colombia	India	Peru	Ukraine
Cyprus	Japan	Philippines	Uruguay
			United States
			Vietnam

Table 4

H1a Multilevel Logistic Regression with random Intercepts and Slopes by country of Independence and Fear of Job Loss

Fixed Effects				
	Estimate	SE	z value	p
Intercept (Importance of Independence)	-0.44786	0.09235	-4.850	1.24e-06***
Fear of Job Loss	0.03191	0.01511	2.112	0.0347 *
Random effects				
	Variance	SD		
Countries (Intercept)	-0.44786	0.09235		
Fear of Job Loss	0.03191	0.01511		

Note. Independence preference (0 = no, 1 = yes). *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

Table 5

H1b Multilevel Logistic Regression of Freedom over Equality and Fear of Job Loss

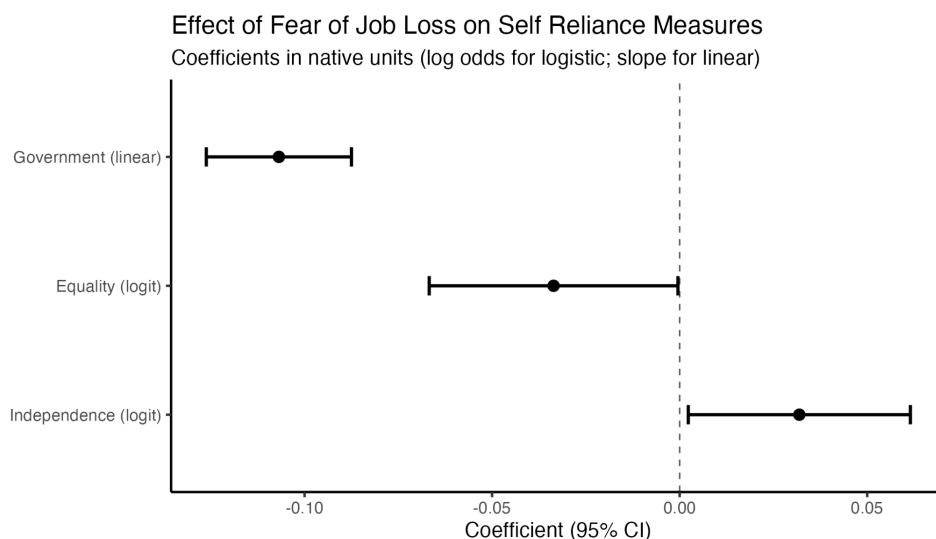
Fixed Effects				
	Estimate	SE	z value	p
Intercept (Preference of Freedom over Equality)	0.41737	0.08797	4.745	2.09e-06 ***
Fear of Job Loss	-0.03361	0.01690	-1.989	0.0467 *
Random effects				
	Variance	SD		
Countries (Intercept)	0.47038	0.6858		
Fear of Job Loss	0.01455	0.1206		

Note. Equality vs. freedom preference (0 = equality, 1 = freedom). *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

Table 6*H1c Multilevel Linear Regression of Governmental Responsibility and Fear of Job Loss*

Fixed Effects			
	Estimate	SE	t value
Intercept (Government responsibility)	5.250555	0.113276	46.35
Fear of Job Loss	-0.106845	0.009873	-10.82
Random effects			
	Variance	SD	
Countries (Intercept)	0.7647	0.8744	
Residual	8.3939	2.8972	

Note. Government responsibility (1 = more government responsibility, 10 = more individual responsibility)

Figure 4*H1 Coefficient Plot - Fear of Job Loss and Self-Reliance Indicators*

Note. Coefficients with 95% confidence intervals from mixed-effects models. Negative values indicate stronger preferences for government responsibility and equality; positive values indicate stronger preferences for independence.

Table 7

H2a Multilevel Logistic Regression (random Intercept): Income control on fear of job loss and independence preference

Fixed Effects				
	Estimate	SE	z value	p
Intercept (Independence)	-0.568015	0.086637	-6.556	5.52e-11 ***
Fear of Job Loss	0.029587	0.007279	4.065	4.80e-05 ***
Income	0.025470	0.003655	6.968	3.21e-12 ***
Random effects				
	Variance	SD		
Countries (Intercept)	0.4286	0.6547		

Table 8

H2a Association between Fear of Job Loss and the Valuation of Independence depending on Income Group

	Estimate	SE	z value	p
Low-Income Individuals	0.04707	0.01460	3.224	0.00127 **
Medium-Income Individuals	0.024667	0.009059	2.723	0.00647 **
High-Income Individuals	-0.005238	0.022755	-0.230	0.8179

Table 9

H2a Controls included in Multilevel Logistic Regression (random Intercept): Control variables on fear of job loss and independence preference

Fixed Effects				
	Estimate	SE	z value	p
Intercept (Freedom)	-0.1974057	0.1072958	-1.840	0.0658
Fear of Job Loss	-0.0005813	0.0119563	-0.049	0.9612
Income	0.0210260	0.0155894	1.349	0.1774
Sex	-0.1109083	0.0167939	-6.604	4.00e-11 ***
Politics	-0.0175019	0.0035622	-4.913	8.96e-07 ***
Age	-0.0039516	0.0005541	-7.131	9.93e-13 ***
General Trust	-0.0126526	0.0211662	-0.598	0.5500
Education	0.0449288	0.0049348	9.105	< 2e-16 ***
Corruption	0.0042640	0.0040153	1.062	0.2883
Random effects				
	Variance	SD		
Countries (Intercept)	0.403515	0.63523		
Fear of Job Loss	0.004441	0.06664		

Table 10

H2b Multilevel Logistic Regression (random Intercept): Income control on fear of job loss and preference for freedom over equality

Fixed Effects				
	Estimate	SE	z value	p
Intercept (Freedom)	0.378221	0.079998	4.728	2.27e-06 ***
Fear of Job Loss	-0.035888	0.007192	-4.990	6.04e-07 ***
Income	0.012658	0.003632	3.486	0.000491 ***
Random effects				
	Variance	SD		
Countries (Intercept)	0.3565	0.597		

Table 11

H2b Association between Fear of Job Loss and the Valuation of Equality over Freedom depending on Income Group

	Estimate	SE	z value	p
Low-Income Individuals	-0.06455	0.01412	-4.572	4.82e-06 ***
Medium-Income Individuals	-0.024952	0.008985	-2.777	0.00548 **
High-Income Individuals	-0.05255	0.02319	-2.266	0.0234 *

Table 12

H2b Controls included in Multilevel Logistic Regression (Random Intercept): Control variables on Fear of Job Loss and Preference for Freedom over Equality

Fixed Effects				
	Estimate	SE	z value	p
Intercept (Freedom)	-0.3943856	0.1042178	-3.784	0.000154 ***
Fear of Job Loss	-0.0048151	0.0133349	-0.361	0.718032
Income	0.0648256	0.0158405	4.092	.27e-05 ***
Sex	0.1133153	0.0170409	6.650	2.94e-11 ***
Politics	0.0556825	0.0036132	15.411	< 2e-16 ***
Age	0.0072118	0.0005638	12.791	< 2e-16 ***
General Trust	0.0634698	0.0218174	2.909	0.003624 **
Education	-0.0019203	0.0050066	-0.384	0.701311
Corruption	0.0072820	0.0040938	1.779	0.075273
Random effects				
	Variance	SD		
Countries (Intercept)	0.363115	0.60259		
Fear of Job Loss	0.006268	0.07917		

Table 13

H2c Multilevel Linear Regression: Income Control on Fear of Job Loss and Government Responsibility

Fixed Effects			
	Estimate	SE	t value
Intercept (Individual over Government responsibility)	4.451212	0.114025	39.037
Fear of Job Loss	-0.084195	0.009688	-8.691
Income	0.149347	0.004895	30.509
Random effects			
	Variance	SD	
Countries (Intercept)	0.735	0.8573	
Residual	8.291	2.8793	

Table 14

H2c Association between Fear of Job Loss and the Valuation of Government Responsibility depending on Income Group

	Estimate	SE	t value
Low-Income Individuals	-0.07081	0.02054	-3.447
Medium-Income Individuals	-0.10442	0.01191	-8.766
High-Income Individuals	-0.06625	0.03242	-2.043

Table 15

H2c Controls included in Multilevel Linear Regression: Control variables on fear of job loss and government responsibility

Fixed Effects			
	Estimate	SE	t value
Intercept (Freedom)	3.4541558	0.1234160	27.988
Fear of Job Loss	-0.0427982	0.0075485	-5.670
Income	0.4289259	0.0209144	20.509
Sex	0.1100852	0.0225643	4.879
Politics	0.1304083	0.0047618	27.386
Age	0.0037675	0.0007271	5.182
General Trust	0.0416994	0.0286742	1.454
Education	0.0308842	0.0066311	4.657
Corruption	-0.0262765	0.0054037	-4.863
Random effects			
	Variance	SD	
Countries (Intercept)	0.4661	0.6827	
Fear of Job Loss	7.9389	2.8176	

Table 16*Exploratory Results on Independence Preference depending on Income Group*

Income Group	Predictor	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Low-Income Individuals	Fear of Job Loss	0.079	0.020	3.885	< .001***
	Welfare Protection	0.140	0.112	1.250	> .05
	Interaction Fear x Welfare Protection	-0.002	0.021	-0.108	> .05
Medium-Income Individuals	Fear of Job Loss	0.042	0.012	3.363	< .001***
	Welfare Protection	0.188	0.100	1.873	.061
	Interaction Fear x Welfare Protection	-0.025	0.013	1.975	.048*
High-Income Individuals	Fear of Job Loss	0.016	0.031	0.501	> .05
	Welfare Protection	0.194	0.094	2.071	.038*
	Interaction Fear x Welfare Protection	-0.059	0.028	-2.076	.038*

Note. Outcome variable = independence preference (0 = no, 1 = yes), *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, $p < .05$

Table 17*Exploratory Results on Freedom vs. Equality Preference depending on Income Group*

Income Group	Predictor	β	SE	z	p
Low-Income Individuals	Fear of Job Loss	-0.085	0.019	-4.36	< .001***
	Welfare Protection	0.229	0.075	3.06	.02*
	Interaction Fear x Welfare Protection	-0.049	0.020	-2.42	.016*
Medium-Income Individuals	Fear of Job Loss	-0.057	0.012	4.61	< .001***
	Welfare Protection	0.349	0.079	4.40	< .001***
	Interaction Fear x Welfare Protection	-0.075	0.013	-5.87	< .001***
High-Income Individuals	Fear of Job Loss	-0.058	0.032	-1.83	.68
	Welfare Protection	0.286	0.081	3.53	< .001***
	Interaction Fear x Welfare Protection	-0.081	0.029	-2.76	< .01**

Note. Outcome variable = preference for freedom over equality (0 = equality, 1 = freedom),

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, $p^* < .05$

Table 18

Exploratory Results on Individual vs. Governmental Responsibility Preference depending on Income Group

Income Group	Predictor	β	SE	t
Low-Income Individuals	Fear of Job Loss	-0.122	0.028	-4.37***
	Welfare Protection	-0.129	0.130	-1.00
	Interaction Fear x Welfare Protection	-0.061	0.029	-2.12*
Medium-Income Individuals	Fear of Job Loss	-0.143	0.016	-8.86***
	Welfare Protection	-0.125	0.112	-1.12
	Interaction Fear x Welfare Protection	-0.050	0.017	-3.04**
High-Income Individuals	Fear of Job Loss	-0.150	0.043	-3.45**
	Welfare Protection	-0.072	0.137	-0.053
	Interaction Fear x Welfare Protection	-0.035	0.039	-0.89**

Note. Outcome variable = government responsibility (1 = more government responsibility, 10 = more individual responsibility), *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$