

REVIEW ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Recognizing People's Agency Amidst Disadvantage: How to Study Inequality Using a Holistic Approach That is Accurate and Non-Stigmatizing

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**Received:** 10 July 2024 | **Revised:** 19 December 2024 | **Accepted:** 31 December 2024

**Funding:** This research was supported by a grant from the Austrian Science Fund (ESP 67) awarded to Christina Bauer, the National Science Foundation's Graduate Research Fellowship Program (#DGE-1842165) awarded to David Silverman, as well as funding by the Dutch Research Council (V1.Vidi.195.130) and the James S. McDonnell Foundation (<https://doi.org/10.37717/220020502>) awarded to Willem Frankenhuis. Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Fund (V1.Vidi.195.130).

## ABSTRACT

In understanding the psychology of social inequalities, research has often portrayed groups of individuals in disadvantaged positions as lacking in agency, skills, or motivation—portrayals that can stigmatize these groups. Countering this stigma, recent developments have been made in so-called “strength-based” research to better understand and acknowledge the agency, skills, and motivation people in disadvantaged positions often show. Yet, this research is not focused on understanding how inequalities emerge. The present research explores ways to study inequalities without risking to stigmatize people. For example, how can we address disparities in certain motivational factors (e.g., belonging, or confidence) without stigmatizing groups as lacking motivation? And how can we study the way people experience disadvantage without reducing them to the role of weak, passive victims? To answer such questions, we integrate traditional social-inequality research with recent advances in strength-based research in what we call a “holistic approach” to studying inequality. At the core of this approach is a simultaneous recognition of context-level disadvantage (a focus of traditional inequality research) and individual-level agency (a focus of strength-based research). This approach allows for a broader—a holistic—perspective on existing inequality-research, and points to underexplored research questions within social psychology (e.g., how do people actively respond to disadvantage?). After outlining this approach, we distill it into 10 practical guidelines and illustrate how to implement guidelines in an existing research agenda. In doing so, we hope to support authors, reviewers, editors, and other stakeholders aiming for an accurate and non-stigmatizing study of inequalities.

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## 1 | Introduction

- “The poor’s poor mental power”  
*Science Magazine* (Vohs 2013)
- “Health literacy explains racial disparities in diabetes medication adherence”  
*Journal of Health Communication*  
(Osborn et al. 2011)

Inequalities (e.g., racial, or socioeconomic inequalities in health or education) are rooted in structural differences that groups of people are exposed to: While some groups are exposed to relative disadvantage in their environment—for example, facing stereotypes about their background, or a relative lack of opportunities—other groups face relative privilege—for example, having their background being considered the “norm” in different contexts, leading to preferential treatment above other groups.

Independent of their given social positioning, people generally show basic human strength and agency in responding to their respective environment, for example, adapting to, coping with, or withstanding it. This is true for people in disadvantaged positions just as it is for people in privileged positions. Different groups respond to the respective environments they are exposed to in equally agentic terms.

Yet, in aiming to understand inequalities, research sometimes portrays groups of individuals in disadvantaged positions as weak and deficient, lacking in strength and agency (Bauer & Walton, 2024; Davis 2024; DeJoseph et al. 2024; Frankenhuis and De Weerth 2013; McDermott and Vossoughi 2020; Silverman et al. 2023a). Consider, for example, social-inequality-discourse that frames groups of individuals in disadvantaged positions as showing “poor mental power” or lacking “health literacy” as in the quotations above. In focusing on alleged individual-level deficits over the context-level roots of inequalities (i.e., the disadvantage people experience), such discourse risks framing groups rather than the positions they are in as deficient (see Kim, Fitzsimons, and Kay 2018; Quinn and Desruisseaux 2022). Other times, research may exclusively focus on the context-level disadvantage certain groups experience (e.g., focusing on the trauma refugees are exposed to). Yet, as we will highlight, this framing, too, risks portraying groups as deficient—as weak and passive victims of their experiences (Bauer & Walton, 2024; Reeves et al. 2021).

Such discourses are not only inaccurate in their depiction of how inequality emerges and functions; they can also exacerbate inequalities, for example, by stigmatizing groups of individuals. As anyone, individuals in disadvantaged positions have a need to feel capable (e.g., Deci and Ryan 2012). Yet, when these individuals are exposed to narratives that frame their group membership as a sign of deficit or weakness, this can undermine their confidence in important societal domains (e.g., school) and lead individuals to disengage from these domains (Bauer et al., 2021, 2024; Hernandez, Silverman, and Destin 2021; Peretz-Lange et al. 2024).

In response to such narratives, calls to de-stigmatize and improve inequality research has grown. Such research has often suggested better recognizing people’s strengths in the face of disadvantage. For example, in a letter that has been cited over 3000 times when the present article was written, Eve Tuck (2009), a scholar on critical-race-studies, has called for the end of research framing youth in disadvantaged positions as deficient (see also Brady 2023). Instead, she asks research to recognize that these youth—as anyone—“care deeply about their futures” and work to “make the best choices they can” given their situation.

Following such calls, several lines of research focused on documenting and leveraging the agency of people in disadvantaged positions have emerged (see Silverman et al. 2023a, 2023b, for review). Research in this tradition has, for example, documented skills that people in disadvantaged positions have developed through their cultures (Azmitia et al. 2018; Engstrom and Laurin 2024) or through contending with adversity (Frankenhuis and Nettle 2020; Hatt 2007). Some research has also developed intervention strategies that represent the agency and strength that people with refugee or lower-socioeconomic-status (SES) backgrounds have shown to counter deficit-narratives (Bauer et al., 2021; Bauer & Walton, 2023; Hernandez, Silverman, and Destin 2021; see also Brannon, Markus, and Taylor 2015).

This so-called “strength-based” research so far exists mostly in parallel with traditional social-inequality research, each with its own benefits and limitations. Strength-based research helps us understand the agency and skills of individuals in disadvantaged positions and the importance of recognizing these facets of disadvantaged groups’ experience; yet, this research does not aim to understand the diverse processes through which inequalities emerge. Conversely, traditional inequality research helps us more broadly understand how inequalities emerge, but often risks stigmatizing groups in disadvantaged positions as deficient (e.g., Scheidecker et al. 2023).

In the present work, we integrate these two areas of research, and propose a “holistic approach” to studying inequality that aims for an accurate and non-stigmatizing study of inequality. This approach centers the simultaneous recognition of context-level factors as well as individual-level agency (defined as individuals’ action and effect; Markus and Kitayama 2003; Stephens et al. 2009): the disadvantage certain groups experience in their environments (a focus in traditional inequality research) and the human strength and agency people show in responding to this disadvantage (a focus in recent strength-based research).

In the coming sections, we first outline the purpose of our holistic approach, its central assumption—that people in disadvantaged positions show agency—and the tenets of our theorizing. Drawing from this theorizing, we then summarize practical guidelines and offer a concrete example of implementing our holistic approach in research.

## 2 | Purpose of the Holistic Approach: Accuracy and Avoiding Harm

Broadly, our holistic approach has two benefits for inequality research. First, it aims to further enhance the validity of

research by offering a more complete and accurate picture of the ways in which social inequalities function, for example, by capturing both the context-level disadvantage certain groups experience and the agency people show. Relatedly, a holistic approach recognizes that individuals exist outside of the disadvantage they experience and are not defined by this one dimension of their lives (Solórzano and Yosso 2023).

Second, in offering a more accurate representation of people in disadvantaged positions, a holistic approach can help avoid harm. Independent of researchers' goals, research does not only describe the world, but inevitably also affects it. Researchers co-shape societal narratives about people in disadvantaged positions through media representations, university lectures, and public talks (see Markus and Kitayama 2010). While narratives that stigmatize groups of individuals as deficient—even if inadvertently—can contribute to inequalities (Bauer et al., 2021; Belmi et al. 2023; S. J. Spencer et al., 2016), a holistic approach that accurately depicts people in disadvantaged positions can help to avoid harm.

### 3 | Assumption: People in Disadvantaged Positions, as Anyone, Show Agency

Our holistic approach is based on the central assumption that people in disadvantaged positions, like anyone, show basic human strength and agency, including in contending with disadvantage (Frankenhuis and Nettle 2020; Markus and Kitayama 2010; M. B. Spencer et al., 1997). Simply put, people do not just passively wait for disadvantage to unfold, but they actively respond to it, for example, in adapting to, coping with, or withstanding it.

This also implies that the roots of social inequalities are not alleged deficits of groups in disadvantaged positions, but the disadvantages they are exposed to (see Bourdieu 2018; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Such disadvantages include, for example, a deprivation of certain resources (e.g., financial resources, educational opportunities), and adverse experiences (e.g., violence). More broadly, disadvantage also includes cultural practices such as setting the values and behavior of privileged people as the norm while devaluing others as “uncivilized”, “uncultured”, or “inappropriate” (Bourdieu 1984; Miller-Cotto et al. 2022).

#### 3.1 | How Do People in Disadvantaged Positions Show Their Agency?

The way people show agency in responding to disadvantage can take many different forms. For example, people may openly challenge the disadvantages they experience through building movements such as *Black Lives Matter* (Brannon 2023). Yet, challenging disadvantage can be costly for people, so that sometimes, they may choose to respond to disadvantage in other ways, for example concealing their stigmatized identity to prevent discrimination (Newheiser, Barreto, and Tiemersma 2017), or accommodating to the dominant group's culture to fit in (Rogers and Way 2019). Although these examples may yield

different outcomes, they are all active and agentic responses to people's environments (see Brannon 2023; Camacho, Reinka, and Quinn 2020).

Research has also shown that, in responding to their respective contexts, people in disadvantaged positions sometimes also gain skills such as interpersonal fluency (Engstrom and Laurin 2024; Kraus, Côté, and Keltner 2010; Piff 2014; Piff et al. 2010 2012), cognitive abilities (so-called “*hidden talents*”; Ellis et al. 2022; Frankenhuis and De Weerth 2013) or behavioral strategies (Cooper 2021; Pepper and Nettle 2017; Sheehy-Skeffington 2020) that can help them navigate their environments. For example, Kraus and colleagues found that people from lower- (vs. higher-) SES-backgrounds more accurately judge others' emotions (Kraus, Côté, and Keltner 2010). Given their social positioning in society, lower-SES individuals may be more attuned to others' emotions, on whom they depend more (see mediation analyses in Study 2, Kraus, Côté, and Keltner 2010). Given that many environments (e.g., academia) are built to incentivize the skills that people from privileged backgrounds show, the skills people from disadvantaged backgrounds show may often go unnoticed and have only recently become the focus of research. Yet, these findings illustrate that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds—like anyone—agentially adapt to their respective environmental conditions.

#### 3.2 | Recognizing Agency Versus Blaming People

It is crucial to distinguish between recognizing people's agency and blaming them for unequal outcomes. While people's agency generally matters for their outcomes, people in disadvantaged positions are not the *cause* of inequalities in outcomes, which is what blame would imply. Consider, for example, the lower levels of belonging that students from marginalized backgrounds tend to experience. Research shows that academic environments often include threatening signals that undermine marginalized students' sense of belonging, hence leading them to disengage (Murphy, Steele, and Gross 2007; Walton and Cohen 2007). Such findings describe the interplay between individual-level agency and context-level factors. Describing individual agency, findings highlight that i) the engagement of marginalized students matters for their outcomes, and ii) in constructing their sense of belonging, marginalized students try to make sense of signals in their environment, and determine which environments are more or less welcoming to them (Covarrubias and Laiduc 2024). Through threatening signals, context-level disadvantage poses barriers to students' engagement in opportunities, hence causing inequalities. Such research findings recognize students' agency in their contexts and do not blame students. Yet, as we will outline in the following section, such research can be misperceived as victim-blaming if research is not communicated carefully by the original authors, authors referencing this work, or others.

#### 3.3 | Recognizing Agency Versus Stereotyping

Another important distinction is that between recognizing disadvantaged groups' human strength and agency and

stereotyping these groups as being inherently more strong or resilient than others.

The present research assumes—and highlights the importance of recognizing—that individuals from disadvantaged groups have the same basic human strength and agency as other people. It does not endorse the belief that disadvantaged groups are more strong, resilient, or otherwise superior to others, which is what stereotypes would imply. Even if such stereotypes are positive in valence, such resilience stereotypes may backfire, for example, leading us to underestimate the negative effects that disadvantage can have, and to provide less adequate support to deal with these effects (Cheek and Shafir 2024; Czopp, Kay, and Cheryan 2015; Watson and Hunter 2015; Waytz, Hoffman, and Trawalter 2015). While resilience stereotypes may still be less common than the deficit stereotypes the present research focuses on, many of the guidelines outlined in the present research may help counter both equally. Indeed, broadly recognizing the *human* agency and strength people share as we propose (e.g., recognizing that disadvantaged groups may respond to disadvantage as other people would) may do so, given that it entails a view of groups as equals, with neither group as superior or inferior.

## 4 | Conceptual Tenets of Our Holistic Approach

Building on the assumption that people show agency and strength in contending with disadvantage as the root of inequality, our holistic approach has three main tenets:

1. Simultaneously recognizing context- and individual-level agency;
2. Reconsidering apparent deficits as potentially reflecting measurement-problems or people's agentic adaptations;
3. Humanizing rather than essentializing the experience of disadvantage.

In the following, we discuss each of these tenets, showcasing evidence that highlights their importance for accurate and non-stigmatizing social-inequality research.

### 4.1 | Simultaneous Recognition of Context-Level Factors and Individual Agency

Recent work showcases the importance of simultaneously recognizing context-level factors and individual-level agency in our work. Overall, this research indicates that i) when we do not explicate both levels, people are quick to focus only on one, neglecting the other, and ii) this can contribute to inaccurate and stigmatizing deficit narratives.

#### 4.1.1 | Dangers of Neglecting Context-Level Disadvantage

First, failing to explicitly highlight disadvantage in the context of inequality can contribute to victim-blaming. When we (e.g.,

as authors or speakers) make unequal *outcomes* salient, but we fail to recognize the disadvantage that causes differences in these outcomes unambiguously, recipients of our work might infer that groups in disadvantaged positions are to blame—in line with people's tendency to focus on people rather than contexts in explaining outcomes (the “*fundamental attribution error*,” Ross 1977). Testing this idea, Quinn and colleagues (Quinn 2020; Quinn and Desruisseaux 2022) conducted experiments manipulating how Black-and-White racial differences in school grades are described: as “racial inequalities”—a description that explicitly indicates that grade differences result from disadvantage; or “achievement gaps”—a description that allows for ambiguity about causes of grade differences. Participants randomly exposed to the ambiguous “achievement gap” framing saw Black people as less capable than participants exposed to the “racial inequality framing.” They also rated addressing the differences in grades as less of a priority (for similar results on gender, see Amemiya and Bian 2024).

#### 4.1.2 | Dangers of Neglecting Individual-Level Agency

Additional research highlights the risk of neglecting individual-level agency. A line of studies conducted by Bauer and Walton (2024) suggests that describing groups of individuals as disadvantaged without also explicating their agency can make people think of these groups as weak and passive and contribute to their disempowerment. As a basic test of this idea, these authors conducted an experiment introducing participants to a fictitious group called “Tendrinhes.” The authors varied on whether this group was presented as disadvantaged or not. Results show that when *Tendrinhes* were presented as disadvantaged, participants were more likely to endorse narratives that imply that people who belong to this group are weak and lacking in agency (e.g., endorsing the idea that Tendrinhes “are among the weakest and most vulnerable members of a society”; see also Peretz-Lange et al. 2024; Reeves et al. 2021). Highlighting the harms of these perceptions, a set of correlational and experimental studies show that such *weak-victim narratives* contribute to disempowering treatments of individuals who belong to this group. In one experiment, for example, the exposure to a weak-victim narrative led people to encourage a student with a refugee background to quit a challenging learning opportunity at school.

#### 4.1.3 | Simultaneously Highlighting Context-Level Disadvantage and Individual Agency

Bauer and Walton (2024) also show that people can simultaneously recognize context-level disadvantage and individual-level agency. Participants could recognize both, if exposed to material that explicitly highlighted the disadvantage a marginalized group (refugees and low-income individuals) experienced, as well as the agency and strength people in this group showed in contending with this disadvantage (see also Reeves et al. 2021). It may seem trivial that people, such as refugees, experience disadvantage and also show agency and strengths. Yet, research suggests that people are quick to only focus on one of these two truths, if we do not explicate both in our work.

To better highlight both context- and individual-level agency in inequality research, studying the ways people in which actively respond to disadvantage may be an especially productive research direction. For example, research on stereotypes could pay more attention to the ways people targeted by stereotypes may actively respond, for instance, by examining under which conditions and how people may resist these stereotypes (e.g., engaging in psychological reactance, individual or collective action) versus ignore or conform to them (e.g., to protect their self-worth).

Beyond countering stigmatizing deficit-narratives, such research would also allow for a more accurate understanding of inequalities, especially when people successfully combat disadvantage. Since disadvantages (e.g., the experience of discrimination) are a source of inequalities in outcomes (e.g., grades), we often interpret the size of outcome inequalities as a proxy for disadvantage - that is, “how bad” the situation for certain groups is. When there are large inequalities, we assume severe disadvantage, and when we see small inequalities we assume relatively less severe disadvantage. Yet, when people successfully buffer negative effects of disadvantage (e.g., buffering effects of job discrimination by applying to more jobs or concealing one’s identity), outcome inequalities systematically *underestimate* disadvantages. Studying how individuals contend with disadvantages may help us understand not only the strength and agency that people show, but also their experienced disadvantage.

## 4.2 | Reconsidering Apparent “Deficits”

The second tenet of our approach is research showing that differences that are commonly thought of as “deficits” of groups in disadvantaged positions, on closer look often reflect i) measurement problems and ii) people’s agentic adaptation to the disadvantaging environment they are in.

First, research suggests that some apparent deficits are rooted in measurement problems. High-stakes testing increasingly uses careful, multi-stage procedures to ensure tests do not carry unintended demands that disadvantage some groups relative to others (e.g., OECD 2020). For instance, items are screened by a group of independent experts and empirically tested for potential bias. Yet, many common measures are still normed primarily on privileged populations, reflecting their norms and cultures (e.g., the “WEIRD” problem; Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010). As a result, some apparent deficits may in part be an artifact of research methods (Duquenois 2022; Muskens, Frankenhuis, and Borghans 2023). For example, the *Graduate Record Examination* is often considered an objective measure of aptitude. Yet, it is more predictive of university success of students from privileged versus disadvantaged backgrounds (Wilson 2020; see also Ragin and Fiss 2017), potentially as a result of students’ differential access to cultural resources central to these tests (see Cunningham 2019). Related research indicates that assessing students through individual assignments, as is the norm in many Western schools, overlooks the interdependence and teamwork-skills of people from lower-SES-

backgrounds (Dittmann, Stephens, and Townsend 2020). Such findings highlight the importance of developing accurate, non-biased methods. To test whether measures differ in their meanings across groups, bias and equivalence testing can be a useful tool (e.g., DeJoseph et al. 2021; see Van de Vijver and Tanzer 2004 for an overview).

Apart from measurement issues, there certainly are very real aversive average differences between groups (e.g., average difference in self-concepts, or confidence) that inequality-research should address. Yet, such processes often reflect people’s agentic response to their environment rather than inherent individual deficits, and should be accurately framed as such. Consider, for example, differences in self-concepts found among individuals with lower versus higher-SES (Bauer and Job 2024; Bauer, Job and Hannover 2023; Brummelman and Sedikides 2023). Self-concepts develop in an active process in which people make sense of themselves in relation to their surroundings. Given stereotypes that are reflected, for example, in teachers’ treatment of students (Silverman et al. 2023b, Study 3), it is not surprising that individuals with lower-SES backgrounds come to see themselves as less intellectually talented. Even extreme cases, such as elevated levels of mental health symptoms, often emerge as an active process. For example, when someone experiences trauma, they may develop dissociative symptoms to distance themselves from the overwhelming experiences (Carlson et al. 2018). Cases of mental illnesses are extreme in that they are often very aversive for people. This makes them important areas of study. At the same time, the salience of group-level suffering also comes with an increased risk of reducing groups to the role of weak victims (see Bauer & Walton, 2024, Study 3; Reeves et al. 2021). Hence, explicating people’s agency and strength in these conditions is all the more important.

In addition to explicating the agency and strength that people in disadvantaged positions show, another way to help people maintain a view of all groups as equally strong and agentic involve groups in privileged positions. Considering the role of groups in privileged positions for inequality rather than exclusively focusing on groups in disadvantaged positions may help to see both groups as equally “norm-al” (see e.g., Moffitt and Rogers 2022). For example, in thinking about differences in motivational factors such as belonging, confidence, or talent self-views (Bauer, Job and Hannover 2023; Belmi et al. 2020; Brummelman and Sedikides 2023; Walton and Cohen 2007), one could consider what factors help privileged individuals gain higher levels of these motivational factors—for example, why individuals from higher SES backgrounds think of themselves as more confident and talented, and belonging more than individuals from lower-SES backgrounds (Belmi et al. 2020). Further, research could investigate how these self-views may help people from higher-SES backgrounds stay in positions of power. Framings that only focus on disadvantaged groups (e.g., only focusing on why lower-SES students show lower levels of certain motivational factors) set privileged groups as the norm and may hence make deficit-views about disadvantaged groups more likely to occur (see e.g., Powell, Branscombe, and Schmitt 2005). Conversely, a more balanced focus on both groups may help people understand that each group actively responds to the respective environments they are in.

### 4.3 | Humanizing Rather Than Essentializing Experiences of Disadvantage

The third tenet of our approach is to humanize rather than essentialize experiences of disadvantage. Recognizing the humanity or human-ness of individuals allows people to empathize with others and treat them in empowering rather than disempowering ways (Haslam and Loughnan 2014). Yet, in studying social inequality, there is a risk of reducing individuals who belong to disadvantaged groups to one monolithic facet of their experience—their experience of disadvantage—rather than affording them the same breadth of human experience people tend to recognize in individuals who belong to privileged groups (Bauer & Walton, 2024; Brady 2023; Schroeder and Epley 2020).

To understand inequalities, it makes sense for inequality researchers to focus on spotting and understanding average differences between groups, since this is how systematic inequalities show. Yet, if exclusive, this focus risks exacerbating perceived differences and confining individuals in disadvantaged positions to the disadvantage they experience, ignoring people's agency and within-group heterogeneity (Bauer & Walton, 2024). To better recognize the human-ness of individuals in disadvantaged positions, it is important to broaden our perspective to recognize the humanity of individuals beyond their experience of disadvantage. This could include welcoming more research involving individuals in disadvantaged positions beyond a context of disadvantage—that is, going beyond the scope of traditional inequality research. Yet, even within the study of social inequality (the focus of the present work), researchers can take at least four measures.

First, the inclusion of qualitative research methods may be helpful, allowing us to recognize the heterogeneity within groups and the unique stories that individuals bring to the table (e.g., the various ways people react to stereotypes that are often hidden beneath mean scale levels looking at selective outcomes; McLean et al. 2018; Way et al. 2013).

Second, publishing non-significant findings may help see how individuals in disadvantaged and privileged positions often share similar experiences, goals, and ability levels (see Frankenhuis and Nettle 2020; Zhang, Job, and Bauer 2024). In doing so, it is valuable to include statistical tests that afford conclusions about similarities between groups (e.g., Bayesian analyses, equivalence testing).

Third, grammatic structures that carry more nuanced meanings matter, too, as research on the use of identity-labels suggests. This research suggests that static identity-labels (e.g., referring to people exposed to poverty “the poor” as in the introduction's first quote) may exacerbate the perceived essentialization of individuals as compared to more individualizing language (e.g., “people” or “individuals exposed to poverty”). For example, experimental research has shown that when someone is described as a “chocolate eater” versus someone “who eats chocolate a lot”, this person's preference is thought of as stronger, and more stable—as an essential feature of this person (Walton and Banaji 2004). This basic pattern has been shown to apply to a broad range of labels, including criminal offenses. For example, when individuals were described as “offenders” rather

than “persons with a conviction”, people thought of these individuals as being more likely to commit crimes in the future (Denver, Pickett, and Bushway 2017).

Lastly, the involvement of community members may be useful (Jamieson, Govaart, and Pownall 2023). Through their lived experience, members of target communities simply tend to have more knowledge about their own communities, including their experiences, goals, and challenges, which can help make sense of cultural differences that may seem like oddities to outgroup members. Further, members of target groups are less prone to de-humanizing outgroup bias (Brewer 1979; Ruffle and Sosis 2006). Depending on the context of research, community members can be involved broadly throughout the research process—that is, as co-authors—or as a way to get feedback at selective points during the research process (e.g., discussing research questions, methods, and/or results).

## 5 | In Practice: Guidelines to Implement a Holistic Approach

Based on the outlined theorizing, we propose the following 10 guidelines for applying a holistic approach to studying social inequality.

1. **Consider and explicate the human agency and strength people show.** For example, consider not just the disadvantage that certain groups tend to experience, but also how they may respond to disadvantage. Ideally, you empirically assess such demonstrations of people's agency. If you did not, you can still include people's agency in your theorizing and interpretation of the work.
2. **Consider and explicate the context-level sources of any inequalities.** As outlined, people may think that disadvantaged groups are to blame for inequalities if you do not explicitly clarify (and ideally also measure) the sources of inequalities. You may have to do so repeatedly throughout any manuscript/presentation to remind people that whenever you describe differences that reflect inequalities, they are rooted in the context, not in groups.
3. **Consider and explicate how even aversive individual-level processes may result from people's agentic responses to their environment.** As outlined, even individual-level processes that can contribute to inequalities (e.g., lower-SES students' tendency to see themselves as relatively less talented; Bauer, Job and Hannover 2023) often emerge as an agentic process in the contexts in which individuals were socialized.
4. **Realize that recognizing individual-level agency along with context-level factors does not constitute victim-blaming.** You should, hence, not shy away from studying individual-level agency as part of your research. Just make sure to clearly highlight the context-level roots of inequalities to avoid the perception of victim-blaming, as outlined.
5. **Consider potential cultural differences in planning and evaluating your studies.** The processes you study may differ in their meaning or value between

communities. As outlined, the values and norms of non-dominant communities are often less appreciated than those of the dominant culture, which can lead to erroneous conclusions about these communities' "deficits." Bias and equivalence testing can be helpful in empirically investigating potential differences in meanings (Van de Vijver and Tanzer 2004).

6. **Consider how privileges, not just disadvantages, may shape inequalities.** Rather than focusing only on groups in disadvantaged positions, a broader view considering the role of both, groups in privileged and those in disadvantaged positions, may help to avoid framing disadvantaged groups as deficient and deviations from the norm.
7. **Use individualizing language rather than identity-labels.** As outlined, individualizing language rather than identity-labels (e.g., "individuals exposed to poverty" vs. "the poor") can help reduce the stigmatization of individuals who belong to disadvantaged groups.
8. **Incorporate qualitative methods.** This can help elevate individuals' own voice and agency, better represent and understand individuals' diverse stories, and avoid reducing individuals who belong to disadvantaged groups to their experienced disadvantages or alleged deficits.
9. **Publish non-significant results that highlight similarities, not just differences, between groups.** In doing so, consider also using statistical approaches that allow you to test similarity directly such as equivalence testing and Bayesian analyses (e.g., DeJoseph et al. 2021; Zhang, Job, and Bauer 2024; see Lakens, Scheel, and Isager 2018 for a tutorial on equivalence testing).
10. **Involve community members where possible**—as co-authors who co-design research or as advisors who provide advice on including lived experience and expertise and a more nuanced understanding of people's reality in your research.

The 10 guidelines may have impact on inequality research in at least three ways: i) the understanding with which we approach studying inequality in the first place, including the questions we ask and the hypotheses we generate (e.g., whether we consider individuals' responses to adversity in our theorizing); ii) the methods we use to study inequality (e.g., considering the inclusion of qualitative measures); and iii) the way we describe our work (e.g., explicating context-level sources of inequality, as well as individual agency).

Broadly, the application of a holistic approach will expand rather than limit researchers' work horizons by pointing to novel areas of research, and methods, as we have outlined. Certainly, however, there will be research questions that, under a holistic understanding of inequality—which we have argued is an accurate understanding of inequality—simply do not make sense. For example, if a researcher were to design an intervention that aims to "fix" lower-income families by implementing norms of higher-income families (as in the example deficit abstract we provide in the following section), such an intervention

would be based on a flawed understanding of inequality (see next section for a more detailed discussion). In such a case, it would hence make sense for a researcher to re-formulate their research question under the light of the research highlighted in the present work. The extent to which an application of a holistic approach will lead researchers to want to make changes to their research will strongly depend on the existing research agenda and theorizing.

## 6 | An Example Implementation

We now provide an example to demonstrate how a holistic approach can be embedded into research projects. To do so, we outline a pseudo-abstract of a fictional study proposal (without results) that uses a deficit-lens. We then provide an alternative abstract reflecting our holistic approach and outline how we implemented the holistic guidelines in this abstract.

While the deficit abstract is extreme in that it uses many deficit elements for illustrative purposes, independently, each element is fairly common in existing research. The fact that the deficit abstract includes many deficit-elements also implies that it requires many changes—and more than an average abstract written by a researcher, following traditional social inequality research norms would.

### 6.1 | Example of Deficit-Abstract

Imagine the following study proposal:

Household chaos is indicative of a household characterized by disorganization, noise, and lack of routine. The poor are disproportionately likely to lead households with high chaos, which may impair children's school performance by increasing both parents' and children's stressful experiences. The current study sought to examine whether an intervention can reduce household chaos among the poor and whether doing so leads to improved cognitive performance. Half of our sample of parents was provided with a set of intervention-resources for improving their household chaos: A checklist determining regular routines for removing their home items, a clock to determine designated mealtimes, bedtimes, and getting ready for school, and reading material on the potential negative impacts of household chaos. The other half of the sample is given a back-to-school checklist as control.

### 6.2 | Modified Holistic Abstract

Based on the outlined theorizing and guidelines, here is a possible abstract of research that has used our holistic approach to improve the previous abstract:

The deprivation of financial resources and time that parents with relatively lower income experience can make it more difficult for them to create the household environment that they intend for their children. The present research aims to explore the extent to which economic deprivation may create discrepancies between families' ideal and real household environments, how they cope with potential discrepancies, and how the deprivation of resources may affect children's school performance by creating such discrepancies and related distress. To do so, we will first conduct two small-group focus groups with low-income parents and their children aiming to better understand their experiences. Building on insights from focus groups, we will then conduct an experimental study, randomizing low-income households to receive universal basic income (UBI) or not. We will assess effects on parents' and children's perceived discrepancies between ideal-vs-real household environments (letting parents and children first describe their ideal household environments and then rate the extent to which their real environment matches their ideal), open responses about how these discrepancies emerge and how families think they could be minimized, coping behaviors (e.g., time spent on coping with low financial resources vs. higher-order needs), experienced distress of parents and children, and children's school performance.

### 6.3 | Description of Main Modifications

Below, we outline key differences between both abstracts, and how they reflect our holistic research guidelines.

First, following Guidelines 1 and 2, the holistic-abstract considers both, the disadvantage lower income parents experience as well as the agency and strength they show in contending with this disadvantage. The deficit-abstract focused on group-level processes (household chaos, and stress among low-vs. high-income parents) over context-level factors as a contributors to inequalities. In doing so, it risked victim-blaming—the perception that parents are to blame for causing less-than-desirable households, which undermine their children's development. To reduce this risk, the holistic-abstract explicitly highlights and even manipulates the context-level causes (“deprivation of financial resources and time”) of inequalities (Guideline 2). Further, to avoid reducing lower-income parents to the role of weak, passive victims, the holistic-abstract explicates parents' and children's active, and agentic responses to their environment in assessing how they “cope” with the deprivation of resources—for example, how parents might simply prioritize securing their basic financial needs over play-time.

Following Guideline 5, the holistic-abstract aims to be sensitive to potential cultural differences. The deficit-abstract uses a real,

and frequently-cited measure of “household chaos” that includes items such as the number of people in a household, and regular meal times (Matheny et al. 1995). While the measure is attuned to White, middle-class norms of raising children reflecting the sample it was developed in (89% of the sample was White; Duncan SES score of 56 on scale from 0 to 100), it seems quick to label deviances from this norm as deficient and chaotic. For example, items of the household-chaos scale assume that having many family members in a home is evidence of “chaos”. Yet, it fails to consider that people may profit from having multiple caregivers to help raise children, and to pass on cultural values (see Miller-Cotto et al. 2022). Based on this measure, the deficit-abstract suggest an intervention that instills behaviors deemed as appropriate from the chaos-scale-perspective—behaviors that may be not be suitable or even harmful for the community. In contrast, the holistic-abstract considers potential cultural, and inter-individual differences by considering people's own goals, and assessing discrepancies between parent's ideal and real households. Further, the holistic-abstract proposes an increase in financial resources as an intervention to better understand the causal effects of financial resources on household environments, rather than risking to impose unsuitable cultural norms upon participants (Even if the researchers did not have the financial resources to implement such a program, a correlational study or alternative culturally-sensitive program may similarly advance a thoughtful and potentially impactful avenues for supporting low-income families).

Following Guideline 8—the use of qualitative methods—the holistic-abstract includes open responses to better understand potential discrepancies between ideal and real household, the way they may emerge, where they come from, and how they may be resolved. Also following Guideline 8 and 10—the involvement of community members—the holistic-abstract further includes a focus group with parents and children in low-income positions. This focus group allows researchers to use people's lived expertise to inform research questions and measurements.

Finally, following Guideline 7, the holistic-abstract uses language (“parents with lower income” and “lower-income parents”) that has been shown to be more humanizing and less essentializing than identity-labels (“the poor” in deficit-abstract).

## 7 | Conclusion

Research on social inequality aims to help us understand, but ultimately also address, social inequalities. Yet, even with good intentions, researchers focused on understanding the disadvantage people experience can inadvertently contribute to narratives that frame the groups of individuals targeted by disadvantage in inaccurate and stigmatizing ways, undermining their own goals. The present work hopes to support researchers aiming to understand and address social inequalities in doing so. We have provided concrete guidelines that researchers can use to implement a holistic approach and hence help to move



the field toward an accurate and non-stigmatizing study of inequality.

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## Acknowledgments

We thank the *Communicating and Expanding Research on Adversity (CERA)* Network for their input.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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