

The Relationship Between Status Anxiety and Loneliness With Well-Being in a Neoliberal Society: Analysis of a Spanish Sample

Jesús M. Canto¹ 

Miguel A. García-Martín¹ 

Macarena Vallejo-Martín¹ 

Abstract: Social psychology has recently shown increasing interest in analysing the influence of neoliberalism on individual psychology. In this study, we examine in a Spanish sample whether levels of status anxiety and loneliness are negatively associated with well-being as individuals perceive their country's economic policies to be increasingly neoliberal in nature. A total of 343 participants (205 women, 138 men) took part in the study. Results indicated that status anxiety and loneliness sequentially mediate the relationship between neoliberalism and well-being. Perceived neoliberalism was found to be positively related to both status anxiety and loneliness. Additionally, loneliness was negatively associated with well-being. The findings highlight that one of the ways in which status anxiety is negatively related to well-being in individuals who perceive high levels of neoliberalism is through increased loneliness.

Keywords: health, loneliness, anxiety, ideology

A Relação entre a Ansiedade de Status e a Solidão com o Bem-Estar numa Sociedade Neoliberal: Análise de uma Amostra Espanhola

Resumo: A psicologia social tem demonstrado recentemente um interesse crescente em analisar a influência do neoliberalismo na psicologia dos indivíduos. Neste estudo, analisa-se, numa amostra espanhola, se o grau de ansiedade de status e de solidão se relaciona negativamente com o bem-estar à medida que os sujeitos percebem que as políticas econômicas do seu país são cada vez mais neoliberais. Participaram do estudo 343 indivíduos (205 mulheres, 138 homens). Verificou-se que a ansiedade de status e a solidão mediam sequencialmente a relação entre o neoliberalismo e o bem-estar. Constatou-se que o neoliberalismo percebido estava positivamente relacionado com a ansiedade de status e a solidão. Também foi constatado que a solidão se relacionava negativamente com o bem-estar. Os resultados destacam que uma das formas pelas quais a ansiedade de status se relaciona negativamente com o bem-estar, em indivíduos que percebem altos níveis de neoliberalismo, é através do aumento da solidão.

Palavras-chave: saúde, solidão, ansiedade, ideologia

La Relación de la Ansiedad de Estatus y la Soledad con el Bienestar en una Sociedad Neoliberal: Análisis de una Muestra Española

Resumen: La psicología social analiza la influencia del neoliberalismo en la psicología de los individuos. En este estudio, se analiza en una muestra española si el grado de ansiedad de estatus y de soledad se relaciona negativamente con el bienestar a medida que los sujetos perciben que las políticas económicas son cada vez más de carácter neoliberal. Participaron 343 sujetos (205 mujeres, 138 hombres). Se obtuvo que la ansiedad de estatus y la soledad median secuencialmente el vínculo entre el neoliberalismo y el bienestar. El neoliberalismo percibido tenía una relación positiva con la ansiedad de estatus y la soledad. Además la soledad se relaciona negativamente con el bienestar. Los resultados han puesto de manifiesto que uno de los modos en los que la ansiedad de estatus se relaciona negativamente con el bienestar en sujetos que perciben altos niveles de neoliberalismo, es a través del aumento de la soledad.

Palabras clave: salud, soledad, ansiedad, ideología

¹Universidad de Málaga, Málaga, Spain.

Correspondence address: Facultad de Psicología y Logopedia, C/ Doctor Ortiz Ramos, 12, 29010, Málaga (España). E-mail: jcanto@uma.es.

The basic principles governing the ideological tenets of neoliberalism are framed within the idea that economics should be organized in line with the principles of the free market and that people should prosper under conditions of free competition and boundless individual economic freedom in society (Beattie, 2019). This ideology promotes policies that defend maximum reduction of institutional intervention in economic practices, legitimizing capitalism with few or no governmental limits and control as a dominant social system, favoring deregulation of the market in any given area of society, as well as commoditization of any aspect of life (Girerd et al., 2021; Monbiot & Hutchison, 2024; Piketty, 2015). Defenders of neoliberalism argue that this economic model is generally beneficial because it propels people to strive for self-actualization, personal growth and happiness (Adams et al., 2019). However, as sustained by Becker et al. (2021), it can equally be argued that individuals are harmed by neoliberalism because this ideology promotes competition (which undermines the sense of security and social solidarity) and leads to an increase in economic inequality (Piketty, 2015). For neoliberalism, economic inequality (defined as the magnitude of income and/or wealth gap between the poor and the wealthy within a particular society; Jetten et al., 2021) is perceived as beneficial, because it creates psychological inducements to achieve greater productivity and the creation of wealth (Beattie, 2019). Neoliberalism is not only a form of capitalism; it is also an ideology that promotes a model of the human being and a way of conceiving society (Fraser, 2022; Monbiot & Hutchison, 2024).

Today societies are characterised by an elevated rise in economic inequality as a consequence of neoliberal policies put into practice over the last 45 years (Piketty, 2015; Solt, 2020). This has led to growing interest in its analysis from the field of social psychology and to considering economic inequality as one of the most important social problems defining our time (Bettache & Chiu, 2019; Jetten & Peters, 2019). Specifically in Spain, economic inequality is a serious problem since it ranks third in the European Union for inequality. Despite a slight decrease compared to the previous year -attributable to the government's social and economic policies, with Spain currently exhibiting the highest economic growth rate in the European Union- the risk of poverty and social exclusion remains notably high, affecting 25.8% of the population. Wealth distribution in Spain is markedly unequal: the richest 10% of the population hold nearly 60% of the country's total wealth, whereas the poorest 50% possess less than 7%. These figures underscore a pronounced concentration of wealth and highlight persistent structural inequalities (EUROSTAT, 2024).

The upsurge in economic inequality is associated with a rise in illness and deterioration of physical and mental health (McCartney et al., 2019; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), a reduction in social cohesion and trust with a decline in community life (Elgar & Aitken, 2011) and heightened violence and social unrest (d'Hombres et al., 2012). The systematic review carried out by McCartney et al. (2019) shows how neoliberal restructuring seems to be related to increased health inequalities, which are associated with lower life expectancy,

self-perceived health and well-being. Hartwich and Becker (2019) affirm that the rise in economic inequality leads to "a deterioration of the social fabric by making people perceive their societies as lacking in fairness and solidarity" (p. 116), causing people to live in separate worlds with sharp intergroup divisions, deteriorating social ties, trust, prosocial attitudes (Buttrick et al., 2017) and the sense of a shared destiny (Rothstein & Uslander, 2005).

Neoliberalism and status anxiety

There are authors that consider the desire for status to be a basic human drive (Anderson et al., 2015). Status indicates one's rank in a social hierarchy. Human beings pay attention to the existence of social hierarchies and the place that individuals and groups hold within them (Kraus et al., 2017). Individuals generally pertain to different social hierarchies and can have different ranks based on the social hierarchy considered. Among the different social hierarchies, individuals are quite sensitive to the signals that indicate socioeconomic status (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). These indicate the position that an individual holds in a social hierarchy in accordance with their material resources. In neoliberal societies the importance given to obtaining economic success and material resources has notably influenced socioeconomic status, playing a very important role in shaping the social esteem of individuals, with a clear impact on well-being (Becker et al., 2021). In neoliberal countries with a high level of economic inequality, individuals not only pay considerable attention to their own economic status and that of others, using wealth as the appropriate social category for understanding the social world (Jetten et al., 2021), but they are also suffering more intensely from being looked down upon by others based on social status achieved. In unequal societies, stress caused by economic differences not only affects individuals at the lower ranks of society, but also those people who, while at a mid or higher level, fear going down in the socioeconomic ladder (Gruenewald et al., 2006). Individuals experience stress if they are afraid of losing their status (Scheepers et al., 2009) and if they perceive that they are not achieving the established socioeconomic standards of success. The higher the level of economic inequality, the greater the cost of descending the social ladder. Specifically, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) hold that high indices of economic inequality provoke health problems in individuals because, as the distance increases between individuals in the different ranks of the social scale, it leads to constant worry and stress about their economic status, a phenomenon which has been termed status anxiety (García-Sánchez et al., 2024; Layte et al., 2019).

Specifically, status anxiety is a broad concept that refers to individuals' concerns about their position in the social hierarchy (Paskov et al., 2013). It involves a heightened concern for social and economic status, which leads to experiencing high levels of anxiety and fear of failing to meet societal expectations of economic success (Melita et al., 2020). Experiencing status anxiety is manifested, for example, when individuals express

insecurity about their own achievements, affirm that they fear not fitting into the economic ideals of the capitalist society, are concerned about the position they hold in the economic status hierarchy, and/or develop a continuous impulse to reach an increasingly higher social position. Status anxiety constitutes one of the factors for which economic inequality impacts well-being and the health of individuals (Willis et al., 2022). This is specifically because of the stress reaction brought about by evaluative threats to self, on one hand, and also by the way individuals may behave in dealing with stress (e.g., increased consumption of alcohol and drugs) (Gruenewald et al., 2006; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2018).

Status anxiety has risen in contemporary societies with the upsurge in economic inequality, even in countries where there previously had been economic policies defending the welfare state but are now undertaking neoliberal-type economic measures (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018). Competition for socioeconomic status is strengthened by neoliberalism by bringing about, first, a rise in economic inequality, and secondly, by assuming the myth of meritocracy, which blames individuals for their lack of economic success, since this myth holds that everyone has the same opportunities for triumphing economically. Furthermore, they deny the existence of economic and social factors that provoke status and power imbalances between different groups and individuals (Becker et al., 2021). The tendency to compare one's own socioeconomic status with that of others is incremented by the climate of competition resulting from the sharp differences in status originated by economic inequality, as well as by neoliberal ideology itself, which sees competition as a source of personal and economic growth (Piketty, 2015). When a person is concerned about their socioeconomic status they react negatively because they believe they are being evaluated and feel that their resulting image is negative (Gruenewald et al., 2006); in fact, concern for socioeconomic status can be the origin of diverse emotional disorders and erosion of well-being. The negative consequences of living in a society with high rates of inequality are due to, among other factors, the status anxiety generated in such contexts (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Thus, it can be expected that the perception of a society governed by a neoliberal ideology is associated with higher levels of status anxiety and, in turn, with lower well-being scores (García-Sánchez et al., 2024).

Neoliberalism and loneliness

Neoliberal ideology, which highlights and foments competition as the center of human relationships and economic and political progress, fosters social disconnection and rivalry among the community members (Becker et al., 2021). The competitive context curtails the possibility of social support that could cushion the effects of the distinct failures (Adams et al., 2019). This causes a reduction in well-being that triggers feelings of insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression (Scheepers et al., 2009). Research studies

carried out from the perspective of social identity (Haslam et al., 2018) have revealed that group belonging and group identification constitute elements (social support, feeling of control, purpose, and meaning) that provide psychological resources with positive repercussions on people's health, both at the physical and psychological level. From this theoretical framework, Becker et al. (2021) found that perceiving a society to be increasingly governed by neoliberal principles had a negative effect on well-being, since it increased the sense of loneliness, perceiving oneself to be more socially disconnected, and feeling as if one were in a state of permanent competition.

According to Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015), loneliness can be defined as the subjective sensation of not having the social contacts that individuals need. When a person feels lonely, they feel forsaken, abandoned, and cut off from people with whom they experience a sense of well-being (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). According to these authors, loneliness acts as a signal that warns us that we should take care of the social connections that we have and that we could be losing them. Thus, loneliness would indicate that we are stronger when we are together. The personal relationships and social support provided by these connections not only add pleasure and meaning to our lives, but they also have positive effects on our health. Personal relationships channel stress and increase the likelihood of being able to count on the necessary help and support to resolve life's diverse and many challenges.

In societies governed by neoliberal principles, when individuals interact with people who are increasingly competitive, the greater the effort needed by individuals to achieve success, the higher the likelihood of failure, and the greater the anxiety about loss of status. Individuals living in neoliberal societies characterised by high levels of economic inequality tend to perceive their social contexts as highly competitive and lacking in cooperation, recognising that their fellow citizens are inclined towards individualism with little regard for collective goals (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019), which contributes to an increased perception of anomie (Canto et al., 2024). For this reason, it can be expected that the perception of a greater implementation of neoliberal policies is associated with a heightened perception of loneliness and lower levels of well-being. It could also be expected, in line with the foregoing, that a perceived increase in neoliberal policymaking on well-being would be mediated by status anxiety and loneliness. However, given the lack of studies in this respect, it is not known what joint role both variables can play in relation to neoliberalism and well-being. The present study aims to shed light on this mediation, analysing the possibility that both variables could have a serialized relation. In this sense, the proposal by the authors is that perceived neoliberalism economic policies contribute to a higher level of status anxiety and lead to a greater sense of loneliness as social ties are diluted due to competition between people to maintain and/or improve their socioeconomic status.

This study examines whether the level of status anxiety and loneliness is negatively associated with well-being as

individuals perceive economic policies to be increasingly neoliberal in nature. We proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The perception of society as increasingly governed by neoliberal policies correlates negatively with well-being.

Hypothesis 2. Status anxiety mediates the relationship between perceived neoliberalism and well-being.

Hypothesis 3. Loneliness mediates the relationship between perceived neoliberalism and well-being.

Hypothesis 4. Status anxiety and loneliness sequentially mediate the relationship between perceived neoliberalism and well-being.

Method

Participants

A total of 367 participants agreed to take part and completed the questionnaire. Of these, 24 subjects were excluded for not fully completing the questionnaire, resulting in 343 valid questionnaires (205 women and 138 men). All respondents were Spanish citizens. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 80 years old ($M = 36.15$, $SD = 16.22$). Among the participants, 41 (12%) had no formal education, 110 (32.1%) had basic education to age 11 years of age, and 192 (56.0%) were university educated. There were 31 (9.0%) unemployed participants, 93 (27.1%) students, 10 (2.9%) free-lance workers or business-people, 171 (49.9%) salaried workers, 26 (7.6%) civil servants, and 12 (3.5%) retirees.

Instruments

Sociodemographic data. after signing the informed consent on the first page, the study's participants had to indicate their gender, nationality, employment situation and education level (primary school, secondary education or higher education).

Perceived Neoliberalism. This was assessed with ten self-developed items based on Becker et al. (2021). These items assess three dimensions of perceived neoliberalism: freedom from economic constraints (e.g., "In our society, control over the economy is left to the free market"), individual responsibility (e.g., "our society highly values individual success", and social inequality (e.g., "in our society jobs and housing are allocated according to ability rather than need"). Responses range from 1 = I do not agree at all, 6 = I agree completely. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained in the current study was .71.

Status anxiety. Participants completed the Spanish Version of the Status Anxiety Scale (Melita et al., 2020). This scale is composed of five items (e.g., "I worry that my social status will not change"). The response range was from 1 = I do not agree at all, 7 = I agree completely. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained in the current study was .81.

Loneliness was assessed with two items from the UCLA Loneliness Scale: "I feel isolated from others", "I feel left out" (Russell et al., 1978), and two adapted ones: "I am alone", "I feel lonely" (Becker et al., 2021). The response range was from 1 = I do not agree at all, 6 = I agree completely. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained in the current study was .79.

Well-being. Following Becker et al. (2021), well-being was assessed with three items related to physical health (e.g., "I often have symptoms such as a headache") and two items related to psychological health (e.g., "I often feel exhausted"). The response range was from 1 = I do not agree at all, 6 = I agree completely. The items were recoded for statistical analysis. A higher score indicates a greater degree of well-being. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained in the current study was .70.

Procedure

Data Collection. Data were gathered between April and May 2023 in the city of Malaga, Spain. Non-probability snowball sampling was carried out, following a lineal sampling strategy by first year Psychology undergraduate students at the University of Malaga. Each student located four people, who, complying with requisites for participation, completed a self-reported survey.

Data Analysis. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS. Participants' sociodemographic characteristics were examined by descriptive analysis. A Pearson correlation coefficient was applied to explore the relation between the variables involved in this study. The SPSS PROCESS macro (model 6) was applied for serial mediation analysis (Hayes, 2022). To test robustness of the mediating relationships, all these effects (direct and indirect) were reported using 95% confidence intervals and the bootstrapping method (with 10,000 resamples).

Results

Preliminary analyses

The means, standard deviations and correlations of each study variable are shown in Table 1. Perceived neoliberalism was significantly positively correlated with status anxiety ($r = .178, p < .001$) and significantly negatively correlated with

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Neoliberalism	4.00	1.12	1			
2. Status anxiety	3.79	1.80	.178**	1		
3. Loneliness	3.22	1.74	.032	.317**	1	
4. Well-being	3.41	1.30	-.122*	-.256**	-.297**	1

Note. *M*, means, *SD*, standard deviation. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$

well-being ($r = -.122, p = .024$). Perceived neoliberalism was not significantly correlated with loneliness ($r = .032, p = .554$). Status anxiety was significantly positively correlated with loneliness ($r = .317, p < .001$) and significantly negatively correlated with well-being ($r = -.256, p < .001$). The correlation between loneliness and well-being was significant ($r = -.297, p < .001$).

Testing the serial mediation model

Model 6 in SPSS PROCESS macro was used to test the serial mediation relationship. The regression-based analysis results are shown in Table 2. As can be seen, perceived neoliberalism was positively associated with status anxiety ($a_1 = .178, p < .05$), which, in turn, was negatively associated with well-being ($b_1 = -.164, p < .05$). The direct effect of perceived neoliberalism on well-being was not significant ($c' = -.085, p > .05$). Perceived neoliberalism was not associated with loneliness ($a_2 = -.025, p > .05$), which, in turn, was negatively associated with well-being ($b_2 = -.242, p < .05$). In addition, status anxiety was positively associated with loneliness ($d_{21} = .032, p < .05$), forming a serial mediation effect. The serial mediation model is presented in Figure 1.

Bootstrap test of mediating relationship

A bootstrap test with 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrapping samples was used to examine the statistical significance of indirect effects. As can be observed in Table 3, the total indirect effect of perceived neoliberalism through status anxiety and loneliness was significant ($B = -.037, SE = .021, 95\% CI: -.083 \text{ to } -.001$). Specifically, perceived neoliberalism indirectly affected well-being through two significant mediating pathways: (1) status anxiety ($B = -.029, SE = .016, 95\% CI: -.068 \text{ to } -.006$); (2) the serial mediating involving status anxiety and loneliness ($B = -.014, SE = .007, 95\% CI: -.031 \text{ to } -.004$). The indirect effect of the perception of neoliberalism on well-being through loneliness was not significant ($B = .06, SE = .014, 95\% CI: -.020 \text{ to } -.035, p > .05$).

Discussion

Neoliberalism must be considered the most current expression of capitalism which, at the same time, constitutes an ideological framework that foments and justifies competition and inequality as motors for economic and personal growth (Beattie, 2019). Neoliberalism defends the myth of meritocracy, denies the social constraints of inequality, seeks the suppression of the social facet of the State regarding provision of public services, and defends the commodification of any area of life (Monbiot & Hutchison, 2024; Piketty, 2015). The staunch defense of competitiveness and high level of economic inequality brought about by neoliberalism deteriorates social and group ties, isolates individuals, raises perceived levels of loneliness, and erodes the beneficial effects derived from social relationships framed within a context where advantageous psychosocial resources are obtained from groups (Becker et al., 2021).

Although research into the psychological effects of neoliberalism is a recent area of study in the field of social psychology (Bettache & Chiu, 2019), empirical evidence has shown the close link between the perception of the implementation of neoliberal economic policies and their influence on the psychologies of individuals and on interpersonal and intergroup relations (Adams et al., 2019; Becker et al., 2021). Our study has demonstrated that the more individuals perceive that a society is governed chiefly by neoliberal policies, the lower the level of well-being. The correlation between these two variables is negative, as

Figure 1

The proposed serial mediation model effects. Note. Effects were reported as unstandardized values. * < .05

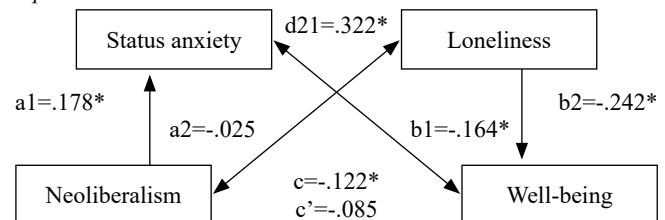


Table 2

Regression-based results in the serial mediation analysis

Criterion	Predictors	R	R ²	F	B	SE	t	95% C.I.	p
Status anxiety	Neoliberalism	.178	.032	11.20	.178	.053	3.34	[.735, .283]	.001
Loneliness		.319	.101	19.19					< .001
	Neoliberalism				-.025	.052	-0.48	[-.128, .077]	.628
	Status anxiety				.322	.052	6.16	[.219, .425]	.001
Psychological well-being		.352	.124	16.00					< .001
	Neoliberalism				-.085	.052	-1.63	[-.186, .017]	.102
	Status anxiety				-.164	.055	-3.01	[-.271, -.057]	.003
	Loneliness				-.242	.054	-4.51	[-.347, -.137]	.001

Table 3*Total, direct and indirect effects of neoliberalism on well-being*

Effects	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% <i>C.I.</i>	<i>p</i>
Total effects	-.122	.054	[-.227, -.016]	.024
Direct effects	-.085	.052	[-.186, .017]	.102
Total indirect effect	-.037	.021	[-.083, -.001]	< .05
Indirect effect ($X \rightarrow M_1 \rightarrow Y$)	-.029	.016	[-.068, -.006]	< .05
Indirect effect ($X \rightarrow M_2 \rightarrow Y$)	.006	.014	[-.020, .035]	> .05
Indirect effect ($X \rightarrow M_1 \rightarrow M_2 \rightarrow Y$)	-.014	.007	[-.031, -.004]	< .05

Note. Base on 10.000 bootstrap samples; Total, direct, and indirect effects of neoliberalism (*X*) on psychological well-being (*Y*) through status anxiety (*M*₁), and loneliness (*M*₂); *SE* = standard error; *CI* = confidence interval.

proposed in Hypothesis 1 ($r = -.122, p < .05$). Although, our study did not show that perceived neoliberalism has a direct effect on well-being, status anxiety and loneliness sequentially mediate the relationship between perceived neoliberalism and well-being. Specifically, as posited in Hypothesis 2, it was illustrated that status anxiety mediates the relationship between perceived neoliberalism and well-being. It was reaffirmed that individuals who experience higher levels of status anxiety perceive a lower sense of well-being (Gruenewald et al., 2006; Paskov et al., 2013). This has been explained by the sustained stress provoked by status anxiety, which constitutes a significant evaluative threat to self and because of the harmful behavior that could ensue while attempting to alleviate stress brought about by status anxiety (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

This study analysed the role of perceived loneliness as a variable that is associated with lower well-being, insofar as perceived loneliness is related to status anxiety in a society with neoliberal characteristics. As has been confirmed in other studies (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008), loneliness is again a variable that negatively impacts well-being. However, it was not found, as proposed in Hypothesis 3, that loneliness is a mediator between neoliberalism and well-being. There is a negative correlation between loneliness and well-being ($r = -.297, p < .01$), and even when neoliberal ideology foments competition as the center of human relationships and personal and economic progress, and as such, promotes social disconnect and rivalry between members of the community, this study has not found a relationship between perceived neoliberalism and loneliness.

According to the results obtained in our research, the relationship between loneliness and well-being is mediated by status anxiety. The correlation found between both variables was positive ($r = .317, p < .01$). In particular, based on the serial mediation analysis carried out, it can be affirmed, as formulated in Hypothesis 4, that one of the ways by which the correlation of status anxiety with the perceived rise in neoliberal economic policies related with reduced well-being is through perceived loneliness. One possible interpretation is that the deterioration of cooperative social relationships, a reduction in membership in groups with which one has a high degree of social identification, the perception of others as potential sources of competition, all lead to an increased

sense of loneliness (Haslam et al., 2018). Specifically, an increase in what Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2014) refer to as social loneliness, which occurs when an individual desires to belong to a community of like-minded people but fails to do so.

Thus, status anxiety negatively affects well-being in various ways. As highlighted by authors such as Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, 2018), in hierarchical and unequal societies, economic status largely determines social esteem and the perceived worth of individuals. In unequal societies, with economic fragility exacerbated by the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise in status anxiety acts as a chronic stress factor affecting people along the economic scale, not only those in the lower rungs of the economic hierarchy. High indices of status anxiety have been associated with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction (Destin et al., 2017) and to negative emotions such as shame, social anxiety, etc. (Simons et al., 2017), as well as damaging individuals' interests in their own groups and in collective actions to lessen inequalities between individuals and groups (Duguid & Goncalo, 2015). High levels of status anxiety, caused by economic inequality bring about deterioration of the social fabric, leading people to live in separate worlds with scant solid social ties, low mutual trust and few prosocial attitudes (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019).

In our study, it would have been important to consider the social class of the participants and to examine how the potential loss of status might differentially affect individuals depending on this variable. Although the effect of status anxiety impacts individuals higher on the socioeconomic scale as well as lower, to analyse the impact of the current economic crisis brought about the COVID-19 pandemic and its differential effects on the distinct social classes, it would be necessary to verify the joint interaction of the effect of increased status anxiety due to neoliberal economic policies and the effect of heightened status anxiety due to the economic crisis. Future research of an experimental nature could be carried out to respond to the questions posed. Furthermore, future studies should consider the impact of neoliberal policies across different cultural and economic contexts, including populations and countries with varying levels of economic development.

In addition, it would have been of interest to analyse how different ideological variables (including the variable on

acceptance of neoliberal ideology) can have a moderating effect on status anxiety fostered by implementation of neoliberal policies, in justifying competitiveness and inequality as beneficial factors and promoters of economic and personal growth. Future studies could analyse if the effect of certain ideological variables and acceptance of community practices and actions serve as strategies that could mitigate the negative effects of stress brought about by status anxiety and by the sense of loneliness. If status anxiety deteriorates group and community ties (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019), future research could analyse whether the group and community ties that foment collective actions to improve social and economic conditions constitute a factor with beneficial effects for physical and psychological well-being.

At the same time, future research should explore the repercussions of neoliberalism on the health of individuals (objective as well as self-perceived). Likewise, considering the multiple dimensions of well-being, it would be desirable to incorporate more specific measures of well-being, both subjective (hedonic) and psychological (eudemonic). Finally, far-right political stances defend neoliberal economic measures, exalting the traditional myths and values proposed from nationalist and ultraconservative points of view (Forti, 2021; Strobl, 2022). Future study could analyse if the negative effects of status anxiety and economic inequality fostered by neoliberal policies are attenuated (or not), as a moderating element, in those individuals ideologically to the far right of neoliberalism.

The prejudicial effect of neoliberalism is not only due to putting neoliberal economic policies into practice that go against the welfare state, deteriorating and doing away with public services (such as public health and education), but furthermore, by eroding group and community ties, which lead to an increase in the sense of loneliness (Becker et al., 2021). The results obtained by this study highlight the need to implement actions for psychosocial intervention oriented at fomenting social ties, which increase sense of community as well as the perceived support from one's own group and social context.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

References

- Adams, G., Estrada-Villalta, S., Sullivan, D., & Markus, H. R. (2019). The psychology of neoliberalism and the neoliberalism of psychology. *Journal of Social Issues*, 75(1), 189-216. <https://doi.org/10.111/josi.12305>
- Anderson, C., Hildreth, J. A. D., & Howland, L. (2015). Is the desire for status a fundamental human motive? A review of the empirical literature. *Psychological Bulletin*, 141(3), 574–601. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038781>
- Beattie, P. (2019). The road to psychopathology: Neoliberalism and the human mind. *Journal of Social Issues*, 75(1), 89-112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12304>
- Becker, J. C., Hartwich, L., & Haslam, S. A. (2021). Neoliberalism can reduce well-being by promoting a sense of social disconnection, competition, and loneliness. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 60(3), 947-965. <https://doi.org/10.111/bjso.12438>
- Bettache, K., & Chiu, C. Y. (2019). The invisible hand is an ideology: Toward a social psychology of neoliberalism. *Journal of Social Issues*, 75(1), 8-19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12308>
- Burns, J. K. (2015). Poverty, inequality and a political economy of mental health. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, 24(2), 107-113. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796015000086>
- Buttrick, N. R., Heintzelman, S. J., & Oishi, S. (2017). Inequality and well-being. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 18, 15-20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.07.016>
- Cacioppo, J. T., & Cacioppo, S. (2014). Social relationships and health: The toxic effects of perceived social isolation. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 8(2), 58-72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12087>
- Cacioppo, J. T., & Patrick, W. (2008). *Loneliness: Human nature and the need for social connection*. W. W. Norton & Co.
- Canto, J. M., García-Martín, M. A., & Vallejo-Martín, M. (2024). A study on anomie and neoliberalism: The role of social disconnection on well-being. *Psychological Writings*, 17(1), 10-18. <https://doi.org/10.24310/escpsi.17.1.2024.18009>
- Destin, M., Rheinschmidt-Same, M., & Richeson, J. A. (2017). Status-based identity: A conceptual approach integrating the social psychological study of socioeconomic status and identity. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(2), 270-289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616664424>
- d'Hombres, B., Weber, A., & Elia, L. (2012). *Literature review on income inequality and the effects on social outcomes*. Joint Research Centre.
- Duguid, M. M., Goncalo, J. A. (2015). Squeezed in the middle: The middle status trade creativity for focus. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109(4), 589-603. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039569>
- Elgar, F. J., & Aitken, N. (2011). Income inequality, trust, and population health in 33 countries. *European Journal of Public Health*, 21(2), 241-246. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckq068>
- EUROSTAT. (2024). *Living conditions in Europe - poverty and social exclusion*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_poverty_and_social_exclusion

- Fraser, N. (2022). *Cannibal capitalism. How our system is devouring democracy, care, and the planet, and what we can do about it*. Verso.
- Forti, S. (2021). *Extrema derecha 2.0. Qué es y cómo combatirla*. Editorial Siglo XXI.
- García-Sánchez, E., Matamoros-Lima, J., Moreno-Bella, E., Melita, D., Sánchez-Rodríguez, A., García-Castro, J. D., Rodríguez-Bailón, R., & Willis, G. B. (2024). Perceived economic inequality is negatively associated with subjective well-being through status anxiety and social trust. *Social Indicators Research*, 172, 239-260. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-024-03306-x>
- Girerd, L., Verniers, C., & Bonnot, V. (2021). Neoliberal ideology in France: A qualitative inquiry. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 686391. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.686391>
- Gruenewald, T. L., Kemeny, M. E., & Aziz, N. (2006). Subjective social status moderates cortisol responses to social threat. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*, 20(4), 410-419. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2005.11.005>
- Hartwich, L., & Becker, J. C. (2019). Exposure to neoliberalism increases resentment of the elite via feelings of anomie and negative psychological reactions. *Journal of Social Issues*, 75(1), 113-133. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12311>
- Haslam, C., Jetten, J., Cruwys, T., Dingle, G., & Haslam, S. A. (2018). *The new psychology of health: Unlocking the social cure*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315648569>
- Hayes, A. F. (2022). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (3rd ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), 222-237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352>
- Jetten, J., & Peters, K. (2019). *The social psychology of inequality*. Springer.
- Jetten, J., Peters, K., Álvarez, B., Casara, B. G. S., Dare, M., Kirkland, K., Sánchez-Rodríguez, A., Selvanathan, H. P., Sprong, S., Tanjitpiyanond, P., Wang, Z., & Mols, F. (2021). Consequences of economic inequality for the social and political vitality of society: A social identity analysis. *Political Psychology*, 42(Suppl. 1), 241-266. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12800>
- Kraus, M. W., Park, J. W., & Tan, J. J. X. (2017). Signs of social class: The experience of economic inequality in everyday life. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(3), 422-435. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616673192>
- Layte, R., McCrory, C., Cheallaigh, C. N., Bourke, N., Kivimäki, M., Ribeiro, A. I., Stringhini, S., & Vineis, P. (2019). A comparative analysis of the anxiety hypothesis of socio-economic inequalities in health based on 18,349 individuals in four countries and five cohort studies. *Scientific Reports*, 9(1), 796. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-018-37440-7>
- McCartney, G., Hearty, W., Arnot, J., Popham, F., Cumbers, A., & McMaster, R. (2019). Impact of political economy on population health: A systematic review of reviews. *American Journal of Public Health*, 109(6), e1-e12. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305001>
- Melita, D., Velandia-Morales, A., Iruela-Toros, D., Willis, G. B., & Rodríguez-Bailón, R. (2020). Spanish version of the Status Anxiety Scale. *International Journal of Social Psychology*, 35(2), 342-369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02134748.2020.1721050>
- Monbiot, G., & Hutchison, P. (2024). *Invisible doctrine: The secret history of neoliberalism*. Allen Lane.
- Paskov, M., Gërxhani, K., & van de Werfhorst, H. G. (2013). *Income inequality and status anxiety*. Gini.
- Piketty, T. (2015). *The economics of inequality*. Harvard University Press.
- Rothstein, B., & Uslander, E. M. (2005). All far all: Equality and social trust. *SSRN*, 1-38. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.824506>
- Russell, D., Peplau, L. A., & Ferguson, M. L. (1978). Developing a measure of loneliness. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 42(3), 290-294. http://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4203_11
- Sánchez-Rodríguez, A., Willis, G. B., Jetten, J., & Rodríguez-Bailón, R. (2019). Economic inequality enhances inferences that the normative climate is individualistic and competitive. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 49(6), 1114-1127. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2557>
- Scheepers, D., Ellemers, N., & Sintmaartensdijk, N. (2009). Suffering from the possibility of status loss: Physiological responses to social identity threat in high status groups. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 39(6), 1075-1092. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.609>
- Simons, A. M. W., Koster, A., Groffen, D. A. I., & Bosma, H. (2017). Perceived classism and its relations with socioeconomic status, health behaviours, and perceived inferiority: The Dutch Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel. *International Journal of Public Health*, 62(4), 433-440. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-016-0880-2>
- Solt, F. (2020). Measuring income inequality across countries and over time: The standardized world income inequality database. *Social Science Quarterly*, 101(3), 1183-1199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12795>

- Strobl, N. (2022). *La nueva derecha: Un análisis del conservadurismo radicalizado*. Editorial Katz.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009). *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. Penguin Random House.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2018). *The inner level: How more equal societies reduce stress, restore sanity and improve everyone's well-being*. Penguin Random House.
- Willis, G. B., García-Sánchez, E., Sánchez-Rodríguez, A., García-Castro, J. D., & Rodríguez-Bailón, R. (2022). The psychosocial effects of economic inequality depend on its perception. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1(5), 301-309. <https://doi.org/10.1038/S44159-022-00044-0>

Jesús M. Canto is a Professor at Departamento de Psicología Social, Trabajo Social y Servicios Sociales y Antropología Social, Universidad de Málaga, Málaga, Spain.

Miguel A. García-Martín is a Professor at Departamento de Psicología Social, Trabajo Social y Servicios Sociales y Antropología Social, Universidad de Málaga, Málaga, Spain.

Macarena Vallejo-Martín is a Professor at Departamento de Psicología Social, Trabajo Social y Servicios Sociales y Antropología Social, Universidad de Málaga, Málaga, Spain.

Authors' Contribution:

All authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design of this study, to data analysis and interpretation, and to the manuscript revision and approval of the final version. All the authors assume public responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Málaga (Spain). CEUMA: 92-2022-H.

Associate editor:

Sônia Maria Guedes Gondim

Received: Aug. 02, 2024

1st Revision: May. 09, 2025

Approved: Jun. 13, 2025

How to cite this article:

Canto, J. M., García-Martín, M. A., & Vallejo-Martín, M. (2025). The relationship between status anxiety and loneliness with well-being in a neoliberal society: Analysis of a Spanish sample. *Paidéia (Ribeirão Preto)*, 35, e3528. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-4327e3528>