

Permanent Uncertainty and Equality Disruption: A Conceptual Framework for Stratified Social Transformation

Dr. David Bull

(PhD., DBA, MBA, MSc, BCMHC, PMP)
American InterContinental University System.

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Abstract: Contemporary societies increasingly operate under conditions of persistent and overlapping instability that extend beyond episodic crisis events. While crisis sociology has documented the normalization of risk and emergency governance, and inequality research has analyzed distributive injustice and cumulative disadvantage, these literatures remain analytically segmented. What remains underdeveloped is a mechanism-centered explanation of how permanent uncertainty reshapes equality processes and produces stratified social transformation. This study advances the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF), a conceptual model integrating structural uncertainty, crisis-oriented institutional logics, and adaptive divergence within a recursive explanatory architecture. Drawing on a structured thematic synthesis of interdisciplinary scholarship, the framework reconceptualizes uncertainty as a structurally generative condition that reorganizes institutional temporality and governance practices. The EDF specifies the Equality Disruption Zone as a mediating mechanism through which misalignment between static equality frameworks and dynamic instability produces divergent trajectories of adaptive advantage and accumulated disadvantage. It further introduces a recursive stabilization dynamic, demonstrating how stratified outcomes reinforce crisis-oriented governance and normalize ongoing instability. By integrating crisis sociology, institutional theory, and inequality research, the EDF shifts analytical attention from episodic amplification toward structural divergence under chronic uncertainty. The framework provides a theoretically coherent foundation for future empirical investigation across domains including governance, education, labor markets, and social policy.

Keywords: Permanent uncertainty; Equality disruption; Social transformation; Crisis governance; Stratified inequality; Adaptive capacity; Institutional trust; Social justice.

I. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The contemporary social world is increasingly characterized by persistent, overlapping uncertainties that extend beyond episodic disruptions into a structural condition shaping everyday life. Earlier sociological scholarship treated crises as distinct events interrupting otherwise stable social orders; however, recent analyses suggest that instability has become constitutive rather than exceptional (Beck, 1992; Streeck, 2016; Kraemer & Steg, 2025). In this emerging context, uncertainty ceases to function as a temporary deviation and instead becomes an organizing condition of institutional behavior and social expectation (Hollis, 2024; Marta, 2025). This transformation demands renewed analytical tools capable of explaining its consequences for equality and social transformation.

The sociology of crisis has long recognized instability as intrinsic to modernity. Risk society theory first argued that manufactured risks are embedded in institutional structures (Beck, 1992). Subsequent work on states of exception and emergency governance demonstrated how crisis logics can suspend or compress normative procedures (Agamben, 2005; Wahlström & Kleres, 2021). Yet much of this literature retains an implicit episodic orientation: crises disrupt, institutions respond, and systems recalibrate. Even when crises are described as overlapping or chronic, the analytic focus often remains event-centered. What remains underdeveloped is a sustained theoretical account of uncertainty as permanent an enduring structural condition reshaping institutional logics over time (Streeck, 2016; Marta, 2025).

At the same time, inequality scholarship has documented how structural disparities amplify vulnerability during crisis conditions. Research across labor markets, welfare regimes, and global political economy demonstrates that economic and social capital significantly shape adaptive outcomes (Piketty, 2014; Standing, 2011; OECD, 2022). International assessments further highlight erosion of social cohesion and widening inequality under overlapping crises (UNRISD, 2022). However, normative justice frameworks, including distributive and capability-based theories, often presuppose institutional stability as the backdrop for equality realization (Rawls, 1999; Sen, 2009). When uncertainty becomes structural rather than episodic, the assumptions underpinning these frameworks are strained.

Despite the convergence of structural instability and entrenched inequality, existing theoretical approaches remain analytically fragmented. Crisis scholarship emphasizes governance responses, risk management, and emergency power without systematically integrating equality mechanisms (Hollis, 2024). Inequality research documents stratification and cumulative disadvantage but frequently analyzes these dynamics within relatively stable institutional environments (Ridgeway, 2022). As a result, the interaction between permanent uncertainty and equality frameworks remains insufficiently theorized.

The critical gap lies in the absence of an integrative mechanism-level framework explaining how structural uncertainty reshapes equality processes and produces stratified social transformation. Much of the literature treats inequality during crises as either policy failure or temporary amplification of disparities (OECD, 2022). What remains underdeveloped is an explanation of how equality itself becomes conditional, disrupted, and unevenly realized when institutional governance is organized around continuous instability. Without such a framework, inequality appears episodic rather than structurally generated.

This article advances the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF), a mid-range theoretical model conceptualizing uncertainty and equality as co-constitutive drivers of social transformation. Building on insights from risk society theory (Beck, 1992), emergency governance (Agamben, 2005), cumulative inequality research (Piketty, 2014; Standing, 2011), and contemporary crisis sociology (Kraemer & Steg, 2025), EDF reconceptualizes uncertainty as structural and specifies the institutional mechanisms through which equality becomes disrupted. Central to the framework is the Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ), a mediating structural space in which crisis-oriented institutional logics interact with static equality frameworks, producing divergent adaptive trajectories.

The EDF contributes to sociological theory in three principal ways. First, it extends structural uncertainty arguments by specifying institutional mediation mechanisms rather than treating instability as a contextual background. Second, it integrates inequality and crisis literatures by identifying how procedural compression and navigation burdens generate divergence. Third, it introduces a recursive stabilization dynamic, demonstrating how stratified outcomes reinforce crisis-oriented governance and normalize instability over time (Streeck, 2016; Hollis, 2024).

To guide theoretical development, the framework addresses five conceptual questions: How does permanent uncertainty differ from episodic crisis in shaping institutional behavior? How do crisis-oriented institutional logics interact with equality frameworks under chronic instability? How does structural misalignment produce divergent outcomes? Through what mechanisms does the Equality Disruption Zone generate adaptive advantage and accumulated disadvantage? And how do stratified outcomes recursively stabilize uncertainty? These questions structure the theoretical elaboration that follows.

The article proceeds by synthesizing scholarship on structural uncertainty and institutional crisis logics, integrating inequality and stratification research, developing the Equality Disruption Framework, and outlining implications for empirical testing. In doing so, it provides a mechanism-centered account of how enduring uncertainty and persistent inequality operate as mutually reinforcing forces shaping contemporary social transformation.

Theoretical Background

Structural Uncertainty and the Transformation of Crisis

Sociological engagement with instability has long been central to analyses of modernity. Risk society theory argued that late modern institutions increasingly generate and manage “manufactured risks,” embedding uncertainty within the very structures intended to produce order (Beck, 1992). In this view, modernity becomes reflexive, compelled to confront the unintended consequences of its own systems. Yet even within this tradition, risk and crisis often remain conceptually tied to identifiable events or phases of disruption.

More recent scholarships suggest that instability is no longer adequately described as episodic. Rather than punctuated disruptions followed by recalibration, contemporary societies experience overlapping crises, financial volatility, pandemics, climate instability, political fragmentation, technological acceleration, that lack clear endpoints (Streeck, 2016; Kraemer & Steg, 2025). These dynamics erode the temporal distinction between crisis and normality, producing what has been described as the normalization of contingency (Hollis, 2024). Under such conditions, uncertainty ceases to function as an external shock and instead becomes an organizing principle of institutional planning, governance, and everyday life (Marta, 2025).

Despite this shift, much crisis sociology retains event-centered assumptions. Even when crises are described as chronic or recurring, theoretical models frequently presume eventual stabilization or adaptation within existing equality structures. What remains underdeveloped is a sustained conceptualization of uncertainty as permanent, an enduring structural condition that reshapes institutional logics and redistributes adaptive burdens over time.

The Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) advances a mechanism-centered account of stratified social transformation under conditions of permanent uncertainty. Given the framework's integrative scope, several conceptual clarifications are necessary to delineate its analytic boundaries and distinguish it from adjacent literatures.

Permanent Uncertainty and Chronic Crisis. EDF distinguishes permanent uncertainty from chronic crisis. Chronic crisis refers to prolonged or overlapping disruptive events that extend recovery timelines yet retain an implicit restoration horizon. Permanent uncertainty, by contrast, describes a structural transformation in institutional temporality itself. Under permanent uncertainty, recovery is no longer presumed as a baseline expectation; institutions operate within anticipatory, contingency-oriented logics that become embedded in routine governance. The distinction is empirically tractable through analysis of institutional planning horizons, codification of emergency procedures into baseline operations, and the normalization of procedural compression independent of singular crisis events. Permanent uncertainty therefore represents not intensified disruption but reconstituted governance temporality.

Governance Context and Generalizability

Finally, EDF does not presuppose a specific ideological or neoliberal governance regime. The framework is governance-agnostic but instability-sensitive. It predicts equality disruption in any institutional context where structural uncertainty becomes normalized and crisis-oriented logics conditionally reshape procedural enactment. While neoliberal systems may intensify adaptive burden transfer, EDF's core mechanisms—misalignment between static equality frameworks and dynamic instability—are theoretically applicable across welfare regimes, political systems, and administrative traditions. Empirical variation across contexts remains an important avenue for future research.

By specifying these boundary conditions, EDF clarifies its theoretical distinctiveness and analytic scope. The framework is not a relabeling of chronic crisis, cumulative disadvantage, or neoliberal critique; rather, it is a mechanism-centered integration explaining how structural instability reorganizes equality processes through institutional mediation and recursive stratification.

Crisis Governance and Institutional Logics

Parallel to transformations in crisis temporality, scholarship on governance has examined how institutional logics shift under conditions of instability. Studies of emergency governance and states of exception demonstrate how crisis conditions justify procedural compression, executive centralization, and prioritization of efficiency over deliberation (Agamben, 2005; Wahlström & Kleres, 2021). Institutional logics theory further suggests that organizations adapt interpretive frames in response to environmental pressures, privileging certain values and decision criteria over others (Thornton et al., 2012).

Under chronic instability, institutions increasingly orient toward risk mitigation, resource prioritization, and operational continuity. Governance becomes anticipatory and precautionary rather than restorative (Hollis, 2024). While such shifts may enhance short-term stability, they also alter the normative architecture within which equality frameworks operate. Procedural safeguards may be compressed, equity reviews deferred, and redistributive commitments subordinated to system survival.

However, existing governance literature often focuses on power consolidation or procedural transformation without systematically examining how these shifts reshape equality outcomes. The interaction between crisis-oriented institutional logics and distributive justice frameworks remains insufficiently theorized. Institutions may formally maintain equality commitments while substantively reconfiguring how they are enacted under instability.

Inequality, Adaptive Capacity, and Stratification

A substantial body of research demonstrates that crises amplify preexisting inequalities. Political economy scholarship documents how capital concentration, wealth accumulation, and labor precarity shape differential vulnerability (Piketty, 2014; Standing, 2011). Sociological analyses of status hierarchies further show how social position influences access to institutional resources and opportunities (Ridgeway, 2022). International assessments confirm that inequality intensifies during periods of instability, particularly where safety nets and institutional trust are fragile (OECD, 2022; UNRISD, 2022).

Normative theories of justice, including Rawlsian distributive justice and Sen's capability approach, provide robust frameworks for evaluating fairness and opportunity (Rawls, 1999; Sen, 2009). Yet these models often presuppose institutional stability as a background condition for equality realization. They articulate principles of fairness but do not systematically theorize how institutional environments themselves transform under prolonged uncertainty.

Cumulative inequality theory demonstrates that advantage and disadvantage compound over time, particularly when initial disparities shape access to subsequent opportunities (Merton, 1968). However, even cumulative models typically assume stable institutional arenas in which resources accumulate or deplete. Less attention has been given to how structural instability modifies the institutional pathways through which accumulation occurs.

The concept of adaptive capacity, widely used in resilience and governance research, highlights variation in individuals' and groups' ability to respond to volatility. Access to financial buffers, informational resources, and social capital significantly shapes adaptation outcomes. Yet adaptive capacity is often treated descriptively rather than embedded within a broader structural theory linking uncertainty to equality mechanisms.

The Mechanism Gap: From Crisis Amplification to Equality Disruption

Across these literatures, a consistent pattern emerges instability widens inequality. However, the dominant explanation frames this widening as either policy failure, insufficient redistribution, or uneven crisis management. What remains under-theorized is how equality frameworks themselves become structurally misaligned under conditions of permanent uncertainty.

Crisis literature documents governance adaptation but rarely integrates distributive consequences at the mechanism level. Inequality literature documents divergence but often treats instability as contextual background rather than structural driver. Justice theory articulates normative standards but does not account for institutional reconfiguration under chronic crisis.

The central theoretical gap, therefore, lies in the absence of an integrative mechanism explaining how permanent uncertainty reshapes institutional logics in ways that systematically disrupt equality realization. Rather than viewing inequality during crises as episodic amplification, a structural account must explain how institutional adaptation processes produce divergent trajectories as a predictable outcome of misalignment between static equality frameworks and dynamic instability conditions.

Addressing this gap requires moving beyond descriptive accounts of crisis-induced inequality toward a model that integrates structural uncertainty, institutional mediation, adaptive divergence, and recursive stabilization. The Equality Disruption Framework responds to this need by specifying the mediating space, the Equality Disruption Zone, through which crisis-oriented institutional logics interact with equality frameworks to generate stratified social transformation.

Theoretical Synthesis of Key Thematic Patterns

Across crisis sociology, institutional theory, and inequality research, four recurring thematic patterns emerge.

First, uncertainty is increasingly conceptualized as prolonged, overlapping, and structurally embedded rather than episodic disruption. Contemporary analyses describe instability not as temporary deviation from equilibrium but as an enduring condition shaping institutional logics and everyday navigation.

Second, institutional responses under sustained instability consistently involve procedural compression, prioritization, and anticipatory governance. Emergency measures, initially justified as temporary—become routinized, narrowing deliberation, accelerating decision cycles, and privileging risk management over distributive balance.

Third, empirical research documents patterned divergence in outcomes linked to differential resource access, institutional literacy, and navigational capacity. Under compressed governance conditions, individuals and groups with greater adaptive resources convert uncertainty into advantage, while others encounter cumulative disadvantage.

Fourth, prolonged stratification appears to reinforce institutional reliance on crisis-oriented governance. As inequality deepens and trust erodes, institutions face legitimacy pressures that justify continued contingency-based management, thereby normalizing instability rather than resolving it.

Although these themes recur across literatures, they are rarely integrated into a unified explanatory sequence. Crisis scholarship often under-specifies distributive consequences; inequality research treats instability as contextual rather than constitutive; and governance studies insufficiently model adaptive divergence. This conceptual fragmentation obscures a recurring causal chain linking structural uncertainty to stratified social transformation.

The Equality Disruption Framework is developed to specify this chain mechanistically, integrating temporal instability, institutional compression, adaptive divergence, and recursive trust erosion into a coherent model of inequality under permanent uncertainty.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Equality Disruption Framework (EDF)

Building on the structural instability, governance, and inequality literatures reviewed above, the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) specifies a mechanism-based model explaining how permanent uncertainty reshapes equality processes and produces stratified social transformation. The framework proceeds through five analytically distinct but sequentially linked components: Permanent Uncertainty, Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics, the Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ), Differential Adaptive Capacity, and Recursive Stabilization.

Permanent Uncertainty

EDF reconceptualizes uncertainty not as episodic crisis but as a structural organizing condition. Under permanent uncertainty, instability becomes embedded in institutional planning horizons and normative expectations. Governance is oriented toward anticipation rather than restoration, and temporality shifts from recovery cycles to continuous adaptation. This structural condition increases institutional pressure to prioritize efficiency, risk mitigation, and system continuity.

Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics

In response to permanent uncertainty, institutions adopt crisis-oriented logics. These logics emphasize prioritization, procedural compression, executive discretion, and short-term stabilization. While often rational under conditions of volatility, these shifts recalibrate institutional value hierarchies. Equality commitments may remain formally intact but become substantively conditional when filtered through urgency-based decision structures.

The Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ)

The Equality Disruption Zone constitutes the mediating mechanism of the framework. It is defined as the structural space in which dynamic instability interacts with static equality frameworks. Under stable conditions, equality frameworks operate through predictable procedures and distributive safeguards. Under permanent uncertainty, however, increased navigation burdens, compressed review processes, and risk-oriented prioritization generate misalignment. Equality is not formally revoked but becomes unevenly enacted. The EDZ captures this misalignment as a structural process rather than a policy anomaly.

Distinguishing the EDZ from Cumulative Disadvantage. EDF also differs from cumulative disadvantage theory. Cumulative inequality research explains how early resource disparities compound over time within relatively stable institutional arenas. The Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ), by contrast, specifies a structural mediation process under instability. Rather than focusing on accumulation alone, EDZ theorizes how equality frameworks designed for stable conditions become operationally misaligned when institutional logics shift toward crisis orientation. Divergence is thus accelerated not solely by preexisting disparities but by the conditional enactment of equality under structural volatility. The EDZ therefore complements cumulative inequality theory by identifying the institutional conditions under which compounding processes intensify.

Differential Adaptive Capacity

Within the EDZ, actors experience divergent outcomes based on adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity refers to the ability to convert resources, financial, informational, social, into navigational advantage under instability. Those possessing

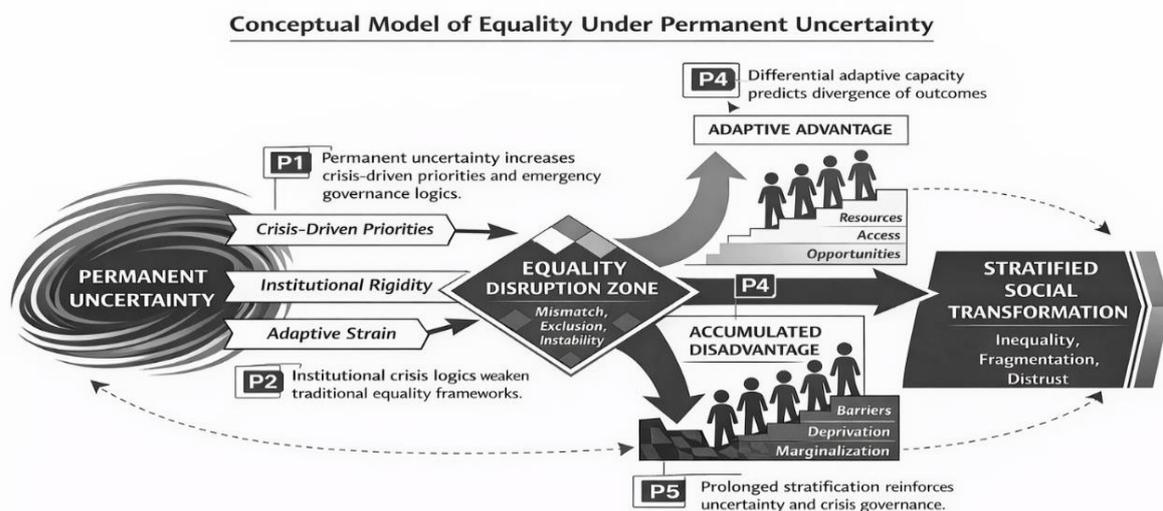
institutional literacy, network capital, and economic buffers are more capable of converting volatility into opportunity. Others experience cumulative barriers, resource depletion, and procedural exclusion. Divergence emerges not as accidental inequality amplification but as predictable stratification under misalignment conditions.

Recursive Stabilization

The final component specifies the recursive dimension of stratified transformation. Divergent outcomes reinforce institutional reliance on crisis-oriented governance. As inequality widens and trust fragments, instability perceptions intensify, legitimizing continued procedural compression. Crisis governance becomes normalized, stabilizing uncertainty as an enduring institutional condition. Stratified transformation thus feeds back into structural instability, creating a self-reinforcing loop.

Through this architecture, EDF moves beyond descriptive accounts of crisis-induced inequality and specifies a recursive, mechanism-based model of stratified social transformation under permanent uncertainty. Building on the structural instability, governance, and inequality literatures reviewed above, the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) specifies a mechanism-based model explaining how permanent uncertainty reshapes equality processes and produces stratified social transformation.

Figure 1. Conceptual architecture of the Equality Disruption Framework.



Note: This model depicts how permanent uncertainty reshapes governance priorities, disrupts equality mechanisms, and produces stratified social outcomes through unequal adaptive capacity.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual architecture of the Equality Disruption Framework. The model should be read sequentially from structural conditions to recursive stabilization. Permanent uncertainty generates crisis-oriented institutional logics, which interact with static equality frameworks within the Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ). Divergent adaptive capacities produce stratified social transformation, which in turn reinforces institutional reliance on crisis-oriented governance, thereby stabilizing uncertainty. Each component is analytically distinct but causally interdependent. The model conceptualizes permanent uncertainty as a structural organizing condition generating crisis-oriented institutional logics, which interact with static equality frameworks within the Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ). Divergent adaptive capacities produce stratified transformation that recursively stabilizes uncertainty.

Permanent Uncertainty as a Structural Condition

At the foundation of the EDF is the concept of permanent uncertainty, defined as a sustained state of instability in which social systems lack a clear recovery horizon. This conceptualization builds on classical insights from risk society theory, which emphasized the centrality of manufactured risk in late modernity (Beck, 1992), while extending them to account for contemporary conditions in which crises are no longer discrete or sequential. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that

global systems increasingly experience simultaneous pressures, pandemics, climate-related disruptions, economic volatility, political polarization, and technological acceleration, that interact to normalize uncertainty as an enduring feature of social life (Streeck, 2016; Wahlström & Kleres, 2021). Within this context, institutions and individuals are compelled to operate without stable reference points, altering how equality mechanisms function in practice.

Institutional Crisis Logics Under Chronic Instability

EDF posits that permanent uncertainty generates a distinct set of institutional crisis logics that mediate the relationship between uncertainty and social outcomes. These logics include crisis-driven priorities emphasizing speed and efficiency, institutional rigidity rooted in legacy structures ill-suited for continuous adaptation, and the transfer of adaptive burdens onto individuals and communities. Research on emergency governance and crisis management shows that prolonged instability encourages institutions to normalize exceptional measures, narrow decision-making processes, and prioritize risk containment over deliberative equity (Agamben, 2005; Streeck, 2016). While such logics may enhance short-term system survival, EDF argues that they fundamentally alter how equality frameworks operate, often in unintended and uneven ways.

The Equality Disruption Zone

The core analytical contribution of EDF is the identification of the equality disruption zone, a conceptual space in which traditional equality frameworks encounter the pressures of permanent uncertainty and crisis-oriented governance. Classical theories of justice and equality, whether distributive (Rawls, 1999), capability-based (Sen, 2009), or difference-oriented (Young, 2011), largely presuppose a background of institutional stability within which principles of fairness can be applied. EDF contends that under conditions of chronic instability, this presupposition no longer holds. Within the equality disruption zone, equality does not disappear; rather, it becomes conditional, unstable, and selectively realized. Formal inclusion and equal treatment may persist at the policy level, yet substantive outcomes diverge as institutions struggle to reconcile static equality models with dynamic uncertainty.

Divergent Trajectories: Adaptive Advantage and Accumulated Disadvantage

EDF further theorizes that passage through the equality disruption zone produces predictable divergence rather than random variation. Social actors with greater adaptive capacity, defined by access to resources, institutional literacy, social networks, and flexibility, are more likely to convert uncertainty into opportunity, resulting in adaptive advantage. Conversely, actors with constrained adaptive capacity experience accumulated disadvantages, as repeated disruptions compound existing barriers and deplete available resources. This mechanism aligns with empirical findings across inequality research demonstrating that crises disproportionately burden already marginalized populations while enabling advantage consolidation among those better positioned to adapt (Standing, 2011; OECD, 2022). EDF reframes these patterns not as episodic inequality amplification, but as structurally produced divergence under permanent uncertainty.

Stratified Social Transformation and Recursive Dynamics

The outcome of these processes is stratified social transformation, a condition in which societies change and adapt, but in uneven and fragmented ways. Rather than converging toward renewed stability or equality, social systems reorganize around differentiated capacities for adaptation, leading to persistent inequality, weakened social cohesion, and declining institutional trust (UNRISD, 2022). EDF further incorporates recursive dynamics, whereby stratified outcomes reinforce permanent uncertainty by eroding trust and legitimizing ongoing crisis-oriented governance. This feedback loop explains why inequality under chronic instability tends to persist and deepen over time, even in the presence of formal equality commitments.

Recursive Stabilization: Structural and Perceptual Dynamics. Recursive stabilization operates at both structural and perceptual levels. Structurally, stratified outcomes reinforce institutional reliance on crisis-oriented governance, leading to codified procedural compression, prioritization logics, and anticipatory decision structures. Perceptually, widening inequality erodes institutional trust and heightens instability perceptions, legitimizing continued reliance on crisis logics. These dual dynamics co-produce a feedback loop in which stratification and instability mutually reinforce one another. EDF therefore conceptualizes recursion as institutional and relational, not merely perceptual.

Positioning the Equality Disruption Framework

Collectively, the Equality Disruption Framework provides an integrative theoretical lens that bridges crisis sociology and inequality scholarship. It advances beyond descriptive accounts of inequality during crises by specifying the mechanisms through which equality itself becomes disrupted under conditions of permanent uncertainty. By conceptualizing uncertainty

as structural, institutions as crisis-oriented, and equality as dynamically destabilized, EDF offers a coherent explanation for stratified social transformation in contemporary societies and establishes a foundation for future empirical testing across disciplines and sectors.

Theoretical Propositions of the Equality Disruption Framework

The Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) specifies the causal relationships linking permanent uncertainty, institutional crisis logics, equality disruption, differential adaptive capacity, and stratified social transformation. Figure 1 illustrates the sequential and recursive architecture of the model. Permanent uncertainty operates as a structural condition that reshapes institutional priorities. Crisis-oriented governance logics interact with static equality frameworks within the Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ), producing divergence in adaptive outcomes. Stratified transformation then feeds back into institutional governance, stabilizing uncertainty over time. The following propositions articulate the internal logic of the framework.

Permanent Uncertainty and Institutional Crisis Logics

Proposition 1 (P1). Permanent uncertainty increases institutional reliance on crisis-oriented governance logics.

Crisis Logics and Equality Frameworks

Proposition 2 (P2). Crisis-oriented institutional logics conditionally constrain the enactment of equality frameworks under structural instability.

The Equality Disruption Zone

Proposition 3 (P3). The Equality Disruption Zone mediates the relationship between crisis-oriented institutional logics and divergent social outcomes.

Differential Adaptive Capacity

Proposition 4 (P4). Differential adaptive capacity generates divergence between trajectories of adaptive advantage and accumulated disadvantage under conditions of equality disruption.

Recursive Stabilization

Proposition 5 (P5). Stratified social transformation recursively stabilizes permanent uncertainty by legitimizing crisis-oriented governance and eroding institutional trust.

Collectively, Propositions 1–5 specify a recursive causal sequence: permanent uncertainty restructures institutional behavior; crisis-oriented logics disrupt equality enactment; differential adaptive capacity produces stratified divergence; and stratified transformation reinforces the conditions of instability that generated it.

III. METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative systematic theory-building synthesis to develop the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF). The objective is not to aggregate quantitative findings or conduct meta-analysis, but to integrate interdisciplinary scholarship in order to specify a mechanism-based explanatory model. The design is consistent with mid-range theory development, where structured synthesis is used to identify recurring patterns, conceptual tensions, and under-theorized mechanisms across literatures. By systematically engaging scholarship from crisis sociology, institutional theory, political economy, and inequality research, the study seeks to construct a coherent framework grounded in documented theoretical and empirical insights.

Literature Identification and Selection

The literature search followed the PRISMA 2020 identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages to enhance transparency and replicability (Page et al., 2021). Searches were conducted between January and March 2026 across Scopus, Web of Science, Sociological Abstracts, JSTOR, and Google Scholar (for forward citation tracing). Institutional repositories including OECD iLibrary, UNRISD, and the World Bank Open Knowledge Repository were also searched to incorporate contemporary governance and inequality reports.

Search strings combined controlled vocabulary and Boolean operators across five conceptual domains central to the EDF: structural uncertainty, crisis governance, institutional logics, equality frameworks, and adaptive divergence. A representative search string included:

("permanent uncertainty" OR "structural instability" OR "chronic crisis")

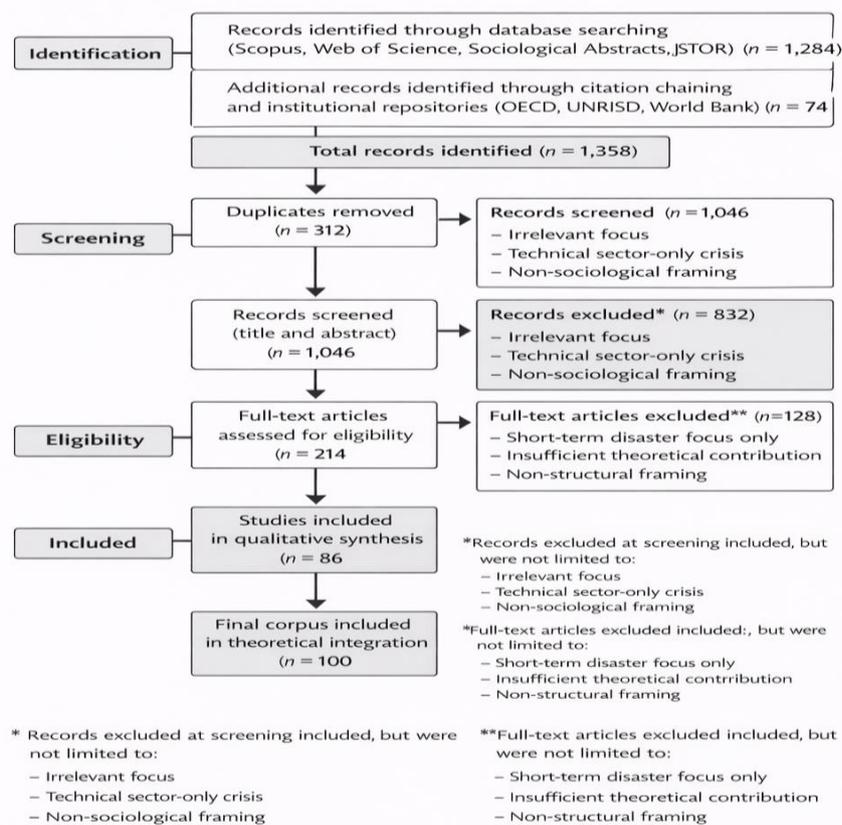
AND ("institutional logics" OR "crisis governance" OR "state of exception")

AND ("equality frameworks" OR "distributive justice" OR "social stratification")

AND ("adaptive capacity" OR "cumulative disadvantage" OR "precarity").

The initial search yielded 1,284 records. An additional 74 records were identified through citation chaining and institutional reports. After removal of duplicates ($n = 312$), 1,046 records were screened at the abstract level. Of these, 214 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Following full-text review, 86 peer-reviewed studies met inclusion criteria. Fourteen institutional governance and inequality reports were included to strengthen contemporary contextual grounding, resulting in a final corpus of 100 sources informing the synthesis. Figure 2 presents the PRISMA flow diagram.

Figure 2. PRISMA flow diagram of literature identification and selection process.



Analytical Strategy

The synthesis employed a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic analysis consistent with Thomas and Harden’s (2008) three-stage framework. In the first stage, line-by-line coding was conducted on conceptually relevant sections of eligible articles, focusing on structural uncertainty, institutional crisis logics, equality mechanisms, and divergence outcomes. This granular coding ensured that theoretical abstraction remained anchored in documented patterns.

In the second stage, codes were grouped into descriptive themes reflecting recurring dynamics across studies. These included institutional temporality shifts, procedural compression, navigation burdens, resource conversion asymmetry, and governance normalization.

In the third stage, descriptive themes were abstracted into higher-order analytical constructs. Institutional temporality shifts informed the construct of Permanent Uncertainty. Procedural compression and crisis governance patterns informed Crisis-

Oriented Institutional Logics. Navigation burdens and resource asymmetries informed Differential Adaptive Capacity. The interaction of these processes crystallized into the Equality Disruption Zone as the mediating mechanism. Longitudinal normalization patterns informed Recursive Stabilization.

This structured progression from descriptive coding to analytical abstraction provides a transparent evidentiary pathway from interdisciplinary scholarship to theoretical model construction.

Scope and Limitations of the Synthesis

As a theory-building synthesis, this study does not claim exhaustive coverage of all crisis or inequality literatures. Rather, it seeks to identify cross-cutting mechanisms across major strands of scholarship. While PRISMA procedures enhance transparency, the analysis remains interpretive and oriented toward conceptual integration rather than statistical generalization. The resulting framework is therefore best understood as a mid-range explanatory model intended for empirical refinement and testing.

Positioning the Equality Disruption Framework Within Inequality and Crisis Theory

Table 1 situates the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) in relation to major theories of inequality, justice, and crisis, highlighting both points of continuity and areas of theoretical advancement. Rather than replacing existing frameworks, EDF builds on their foundational insights while addressing a critical limitation shared across much of the literature: the implicit assumption that social and institutional stability is the default condition under which equality frameworks operate.

Classical theories of justice, such as Rawls's theory of justice, are premised on relatively stable institutional arrangements in which principles of fairness can be designed and implemented (Rawls, 1971). In these models, crises are treated as external shocks that temporarily disrupt otherwise functional systems. EDF advances this tradition by removing the stability assumption altogether, arguing that when instability becomes permanent, principles of fair distribution alone are insufficient to explain equality outcomes. Under chronic uncertainty, equality frameworks may remain normatively intact yet become operationally unstable.

Similarly, Sen's capability approach foregrounds agency and individuals' ability to convert resources into valued functionings (Sen, 2009). While this framework is highly sensitive to contextual variation, it does not explicitly theorize uncertainty as a structural condition that systematically constrains conversion processes. EDF extends the capability approach by embedding resource conversion within environments of permanent uncertainty, showing how adaptive capacity becomes unevenly consequential when institutional conditions are volatile and unpredictable.

The work of Young on structural injustice emphasizes relational and systemic forms of oppression that produce durable inequality (Young, 1990). In this perspective, crises often function as amplifiers of preexisting injustice. EDF complements this insight but advances it by theorizing crisis not merely as an amplifier, but as a permanent condition that reshapes institutional logics themselves. In doing so, EDF explains how equality mechanisms may destabilize even in the absence of overtly oppressive intent or policy change.

Beck's risk society thesis marks an important shift toward understanding risk and uncertainty as structural features of modernity (Beck, 1992). However, risk society theory remains largely indirect in its treatment of equality, focusing on risk distribution rather than the functioning of equality frameworks. EDF builds on Beck's structural insight while specifying the mechanisms through which uncertainty translates into equality disruption, thereby connecting macro-level risk conditions to meso-level institutional behavior and micro-level outcomes.

Standing's analysis of the precariat provides a powerful account of insecurity as a defining condition of contemporary labor markets (Standing, 2011). Yet this framework is primarily outcome-focused and sector-specific, emphasizing employment precarity rather than broader equality processes. EDF generalizes beyond labor to explain how permanent uncertainty affects equality across social domains, including education, healthcare, and public services, regardless of employment status.

This comparison highlights the central contribution of the Equality Disruption Framework. EDF explicitly theorizes why equality frameworks themselves become unstable under conditions of chronic uncertainty. By conceptualizing uncertainty as a permanent structural condition and modeling its effects through institutional crisis logics, equality disruption zones, and recursive feedback loops, EDF offers a mechanistic and dynamic account of inequality that extends beyond distributional, relational, or outcome-based explanations. In doing so, EDF provides a unifying theoretical lens for understanding stratified social transformation in an era where crisis is no longer an exception, but the organizing condition of social life.

Table 1. EDF in Relation to Major Inequality and Crisis Theories (Positioning & Originality)

| Theory | Core Assumption | Crisis Role | Equality Logic | EDF Advancement |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Rawls – Theory of Justice (Rawls, 1971) | Institutional stability assumed | External, episodic shock | Fair distribution under stable rules | EDF removes the stability assumption, showing how fairness principles destabilize when uncertainty is permanent |
| Sen – Capability Approach (Sen, 2009) | Agency and choice are central | Contextual constraint | Resource-to-capability conversion | EDF embeds capability conversion within chronic uncertainty, explaining uneven adaptive capacity |
| Young – Structural Injustice (Young, 1990) | Structural oppression is persistent | Crisis as amplifier | Relational and systemic injustice | EDF adds crisis permanence, showing how instability reshapes institutions beyond oppression alone |
| Beck – Risk Society (Beck, 1992) | Manufactured risk is structural | Structural but diffuse | Indirect implications for equality | EDF specifies equality mechanisms linking risk, institutions, and outcomes |
| Standing – Precariat (Standing, 2011) | Insecurity defines a class | Outcome of global change | Labor market precarity | EDF generalizes insecurity beyond labor to cross-sectoral equality disruption |

Key Distinction: EDF is the only framework that explains why equality frameworks themselves destabilize under conditions of permanent uncertainty, rather than merely documenting unequal outcomes, amplified injustice, or insecure populations.

Theoretical Findings

The structured synthesis revealed recurring patterns across crisis governance, inequality, and institutional theory literatures. These patterns collectively support the central claims of the Equality Disruption Framework and provide conceptual answers to the guiding research questions.

RQ1: How does permanent uncertainty differ from episodic crisis in shaping institutional behavior?

The synthesis demonstrates that permanent uncertainty differs fundamentally from episodic crisis in temporal orientation, institutional adaptation, and normative recalibration. Episodic crisis models assume disruption followed by recovery and re-equilibration. In contrast, literature on structural instability and prolonged crisis governance shows that institutions increasingly operate under conditions lacking clear recovery endpoints (Streeck, 2016; Kraemer & Steg, 2025). Under such conditions, governance shifts from restorative to anticipatory modes, embedding contingency into routine decision-making (Hollis, 2024). The findings therefore indicate that permanent uncertainty restructures institutional temporality itself, replacing recovery logic with continuous adaptation.

RQ2: How do crisis-oriented institutional logics interact with traditional equality frameworks?

The synthesis reveals consistent evidence that crisis-oriented institutional logics, characterized by prioritization, efficiency, and procedural compression, interact with equality frameworks by conditionally constraining their enactment. While formal equality commitments are rarely abandoned, their implementation becomes filtered through urgency-based criteria. Studies of emergency governance and institutional adaptation show that redistributive safeguards, deliberative processes, and inclusion mechanisms are frequently subordinated to stabilization goals (Agamben, 2005; Wahlström & Kleres, 2021). These findings support the EDF claim that equality frameworks remain formally intact but substantively reconfigured under structural instability.

RQ3: How does misalignment contribute to divergent outcomes?

Across literatures, inequality during crises is consistently documented, yet explanations often attribute divergence to implementation failure. The synthesis instead identifies structural misalignment as the key mechanism. When equality frameworks designed for stable institutional environments operate within chronically unstable systems, navigation burdens

increase and procedural access becomes uneven. Adaptive demands rise while distributive safeguards weaken. This misalignment produces predictable divergence between actors with varying institutional literacy, resource buffers, and social capital (Piketty, 2014; OECD, 2022). Divergence therefore emerges not as accidental amplification but as a structural outcome of institutional-environmental incongruence.

RQ4: Through what mechanisms does the Equality Disruption Zone produce adaptive advantage and accumulated disadvantage?

The literature consistently highlights variation in adaptive capacity as a determinant of outcomes under instability. Actors with access to financial reserves, informational capital, and institutional familiarity are better positioned to convert uncertainty into opportunity. Others experience cumulative barriers as disruptions compound preexisting vulnerabilities (Standing, 2011). The synthesis clarifies that the Equality Disruption Zone functions as a mediating space where crisis logics intersect with equality frameworks, generating adaptive sorting. Resource conversion asymmetry and procedural navigation burdens operate as the primary mechanisms producing adaptive advantage and accumulated disadvantage.

RQ5: How does stratified transformation reinforce permanent uncertainty?

The final pattern identified in the synthesis concerns recursive dynamics. Studies of institutional trust, social cohesion, and governance normalization demonstrate that prolonged inequality erodes legitimacy and reinforces perceptions of instability (UNRISD, 2022). As stratification intensifies, institutions increasingly rely on crisis-oriented governance, further normalizing procedural compression and anticipatory logics. This recursive feedback loop stabilizes uncertainty as a background condition rather than resolving it. The findings therefore support the EDF proposition that stratified social transformation and permanent uncertainty become mutually reinforcing.

Theoretical Implications

The Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) advances sociological theory by specifying how structural uncertainty reshapes institutional logics and equality mechanisms in ways that produce stratified social transformation. Rather than treating crisis and inequality as parallel or episodically intersecting phenomena, EDF integrates them within a recursive explanatory model. The theoretical implications extend across crisis sociology, inequality and justice theory, and institutional analysis.

Reframing Crisis: From Episodic Disruption to Structural Condition

First, EDF contributes to crisis sociology by reconceptualizing uncertainty as a permanent structural condition rather than an episodic interruption. Classical crisis models frequently presume recovery, recalibration, or eventual re-equilibration. Even in analyses of chronic or overlapping crises, instability is often framed as intensified disruption within otherwise stable institutional orders. EDF departs from this orientation by arguing that permanent uncertainty reorganizes institutional temporality itself. Governance shifts from restorative logic toward anticipatory and precautionary modes, embedding contingency within routine decision-making structures.

This reconceptualization shifts the analytical focus from crisis response to crisis normalization. The relevant theoretical question becomes not how institutions recover, but how they operate when recovery is no longer presumed. By situating instability as structural, EDF clarifies why procedural compression, prioritization, and adaptive filtering become durable features of governance rather than temporary measures. In doing so, the framework extends structural risk theories by specifying the institutional mechanisms through which uncertainty translates into distributive consequences.

Rethinking Equality Under Structural Instability

Second, EDF advances inequality and justice theory by challenging the often-implicit assumption of institutional stability underlying distributive frameworks. Normative models of justice articulate principles of fairness, capability expansion, or structural redress within institutional contexts presumed to be relatively stable and procedurally predictable. EDF does not contest these principles; rather, it interrogates the conditions under which they operate.

The framework demonstrates that when uncertainty becomes permanent, equality frameworks may remain formally intact yet become operationally unstable. Crisis-oriented institutional logics conditionally reshape the enactment of equality commitments. Procedural safeguards may narrow, access pathways may become more complex, and distributive criteria may shift toward efficiency and adaptability. As a result, divergence emerges not solely from overt injustice or policy retrenchment, but from structural misalignment between static equality designs and dynamic institutional environments.

This reframing move inequality analysis beyond amplification models. Instead of asking why inequality worsens during crises, EDF asks how institutional mediation under structural instability reorganizes the pathways through which equality is realized. The Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ) provides a mechanism-level explanation linking institutional adaptation to divergent outcomes. In this sense, EDF contributes a dynamic account of equality destabilization under chronic uncertainty.

Integrating Institutional Logics and Stratification Processes

Third, EDF contributes to institutional theory by linking governance adaptation directly to stratification dynamics. Institutional logics scholarship emphasizes how organizations interpret and respond to environmental pressures. EDF extends this insight by demonstrating that under permanent uncertainty, crisis-oriented logics systematically interact with distributive mechanisms. Institutional adaptation is not normatively neutral; it reshapes who benefits and who bears adaptive burdens.

By integrating adaptive capacity into this analysis, EDF bridges institutional theory and cumulative inequality research. Differential adaptive capacity becomes consequential not merely because resources differ, but because institutional environments amplify the significance of those differences under instability. Resource conversion asymmetry and navigation burdens operate as sorting mechanisms within the EDZ, generating predictable divergence between adaptive advantage and accumulated disadvantage.

This integration reframes stratification as a process of adaptive differentiation under structural instability rather than solely as a function of static resource disparities. It clarifies how institutional responses to uncertainty contribute to stratified outcomes even in the absence of explicit exclusionary intent.

Recursive Stabilization and the Normalization of Inequality

A further theoretical contribution lies in the specification of recursive stabilization. EDF posits that stratified transformation does not merely result from permanent uncertainty; it feeds back into it. As divergence intensifies and institutional trust fragments, perceptions of instability are reinforced. These perceptions legitimize continued reliance on crisis-oriented governance, normalizing procedural compression and anticipatory logics. In this way, uncertainty and inequality become mutually reinforced rather than independently operating dynamics.

This recursive dimension extends existing accounts of cumulative inequality by embedding them within governance feedback loops. Stratification is not only path-dependent but institutionally self-reinforcing under chronic instability. The recursive model therefore shifts analysis from linear amplification to dynamic reproduction, highlighting how institutional adaptation and social divergence co-evolve over time.

Toward a Mechanism-Centered Theory of Stratified Transformation

Collectively, these implications position EDF as a mechanism-centered framework integrating crisis sociology, institutional theory, and inequality research. Its core contribution lies in specifying the mediating processes through which structural uncertainty translates into stratified social transformation. By identifying the Equality Disruption Zone as the locus of institutional-environmental misalignment and adaptive sorting, EDF provides a coherent explanatory architecture linking macro-level instability to meso-level institutional change and micro-level divergence.

In contrast to episodic crisis models or static distributive frameworks, EDF conceptualizes social transformation as recursive, adaptive, and uneven. The framework thus invites reconsideration of how equality is theorized in an era where instability is no longer anomalous but constitutive. Rather than centering analysis on recovery or resilience alone, EDF foregrounds structural divergence as a defining dynamic of contemporary social organization.

Core Theoretical Contributions

The Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) advances sociological theory by integrating structural uncertainty, institutional logics, and stratification processes within a single recursive explanatory architecture. While prior scholarship examined risk (Beck, 1992), emergency governance (Agamben, 2005), and cumulative inequality (Piketty, 2014; Standing, 2011), these traditions remain analytically segmented. EDF synthesizes these strands by specifying how permanent uncertainty reshapes institutional behavior and destabilizes equality mechanisms.

First, the framework reconceptualizes uncertainty as a structurally generative condition rather than an episodic disruption. This shift reframes governance from restorative crisis management to continuous anticipatory adaptation. Second, EDF introduces the Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ) as a mediating mechanism linking crisis-oriented institutional logics to divergent social outcomes. Rather than attributing widening inequality to policy failure alone, the framework explains how structural misalignment between static equality frameworks and dynamic instability conditions produces predictable divergence.

Third, EDF specifies a recursive stabilization dynamic. Stratified outcomes reinforce institutional reliance on crisis-oriented governance, normalizing procedural compression and sustaining the uncertainty that generates inequality. This recursive formulation extends cumulative inequality theory by embedding stratification within governance feedback loops.

Collectively, these contributions position EDF as a mechanism-centered framework capable of explaining how equality frameworks themselves become destabilized under conditions of permanent uncertainty.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study advances a mechanism-centered explanation of how equality is reconfigured under conditions of permanent uncertainty and how this reconfiguration produces stratified social transformation. Rather than treating crises as episodic disruptions or inequality as a static outcome, the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) integrates structural uncertainty, institutional logics, and adaptive divergence within a recursive explanatory architecture.

The central contribution lies in reconceptualizing uncertainty as a structurally generative condition. When instability becomes embedded within institutional temporality, governance shifts from restorative to anticipatory modes. Crisis-oriented institutional logics, prioritization, procedural compression, risk containment, become normalized features of decision-making rather than temporary responses. This shift alters the conditions under which equality frameworks operate.

The framework further specifies the Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ) as a mediating mechanism linking institutional adaptation to divergent outcomes. Under permanent uncertainty, equality frameworks grounded in stability assumptions become operationally strained. While formal commitments to fairness may persist, the capacity to realize those commitments becomes uneven. Divergence therefore emerges not solely from policy failure, but from structural misalignment between dynamic instability and static distributive designs.

By incorporating differential adaptive capacity, the EDF explains why some actors convert uncertainty into advantage while others experience cumulative disadvantages. Inequality thus appears not as an episodic amplification but as a process of adaptive differentiation under chronic instability.

Finally, the recursive dimension of the framework demonstrates how stratified outcomes reinforce crisis-oriented governance. As institutional trust fragments and perceptions of instability intensify, anticipatory logics become further entrenched. Uncertainty and inequality therefore co-evolve in a mutually reinforcing cycle.

Taken together, the EDF offers a theoretical reorientation: social transformation under permanent uncertainty is not characterized by collective recovery, but by structured divergence.

Directions for Empirical Research

Although conceptual, the EDF is empirically tractable. Future research should operationalize its core constructs and test the proposed relationships across sectors and contexts. Permanent uncertainty may be measured through indicators of institutional volatility, governance turnover, crisis frequency, and perceived instability. Crisis-oriented institutional logics could be assessed through procedural prioritization metrics, emergency governance measures, and shifts in administrative temporality.

The Equality Disruption Zone may be operationalized through indicators of access variability, navigation burden, and conditional policy enactment. Differential adaptive capacity could be examined through resource access, institutional literacy, network capital, and flexibility measures.

Longitudinal designs are particularly well suited to testing the recursive stabilization dynamic, examining whether stratified outcomes predict increased reliance on crisis-oriented governance over time. Comparative cross-national studies may further clarify how welfare regimes and political systems moderate EDF processes.

By articulating measurable constructs and relational pathways, the framework provides a foundation for interdisciplinary empirical investigation.

Limitations

As a theory-building study, this research does not provide empirical validation of the Equality Disruption Framework. The findings are conceptual, derived from structured thematic synthesis and analytic integration rather than original data collection. Accordingly, the strength and boundary conditions of the proposed relationships remain subject to empirical examination.

The framework is intentionally cross-sectoral and abstract. While this enhances theoretical scope, it may obscure domain-specific mechanisms operating within particular institutional contexts. Sector-level studies are necessary to refine construct operationalization and identify contextual moderators.

Finally, although the framework engages global scholarship, it does not explicitly model variation across political systems, cultural contexts, or welfare regimes. Future comparative research is required to assess how institutional configurations condition the dynamics described here.

These limitations reflect the scope of theory construction rather than conceptual weakness and underscore the need for systematic empirical extension.

V. CONCLUSION

Contemporary societies increasingly operate under conditions in which instability is not episodic but structural. This study responds to that transformation by advancing the Equality Disruption Framework, a mechanism-centered model explaining how permanent uncertainty reshapes institutional logics, destabilizes equality frameworks, and produces stratified social transformation.

By specifying the Equality Disruption Zone and the recursive dynamics linking inequality and governance, the framework integrates crisis sociology, inequality theory, and institutional analysis within a unified explanatory architecture. In doing so, it shifts analytical attention from recovery and resilience toward adaptive divergence and recursive stabilization.

In an era where uncertainty constitutes an organizing principle of social life, understanding how equality itself becomes disrupted is essential. The EDF provides a conceptual foundation for that inquiry and invites empirical and comparative research capable of examining how stratified transformation unfolds across domains and contexts.

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