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Testing the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF): Permanent Uncertainty, Institutional Crisis Logics, and Stratified Social Outcomes

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Abstract: **Contemporary societies increasingly operate under conditions of chronic instability rather than episodic crisis, raising urgent questions about how equality functions under permanent uncertainty. This study empirically tests the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF), which proposes that sustained instability normalizes crisis-oriented institutional logics, destabilizes equality processes, and produces stratified social outcomes through differential adaptive capacity and recursive trust dynamics. Using structural equation modeling (SEM) with a sample of 180 adults, we estimated direct, moderated, and recursive pathways among permanent uncertainty, crisis-oriented institutional logics, equality disruption, adaptive capacity, adaptive advantage, accumulated disadvantage, and institutional trust. Results indicate that permanent uncertainty strongly predicts crisis-oriented institutional logics ($\beta = .59$, $p < .001$), which in turn predict equality disruption ($\beta = .55$, $p < .001$). Equality disruption reduces adaptive advantage ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .001$) and increases accumulated disadvantage ($\beta = .60$, $p < .001$), producing structured divergence. Latent interaction effects demonstrate that adaptive capacity buffers, but does not eliminate, divergence pathways. Accumulated disadvantage erodes institutional trust, which recursively reinforces perceptions of permanent uncertainty. Model fit indices indicate excellent fit (CFI = .96, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04). These findings validate EDF as a mechanism-based explanation of how equality becomes destabilized under chronic instability and demonstrate that inequality and uncertainty operate as mutually reinforcing structural processes.**

Keywords: **permanent uncertainty; equality disruption; crisis-oriented governance; adaptive capacity; accumulated disadvantage; institutional trust; social transformation; structural equation modeling.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies increasingly operate under conditions of persistence and overlapping instability. Global health emergencies, climate volatility, economic precarity, forced migration, and geopolitical fragmentation have converged to produce sustained uncertainty without clear recovery horizons (Beck, 1992; Streeck, 2016; UNRISD, 2022). Unlike earlier periods characterized by cyclical disruption and stabilization, current social conditions reflect what may be described as permanent uncertainty: instability embedded within institutional routines, governance structures, and everyday life. This structural shift carries significant implications for how equality, inclusion, and fairness are enacted across social systems.

A substantial body of empirical research documents that prolonged instability is associated with widening inequalities in access to healthcare, education, employment, and social protection (OECD, 2022; Hickel et al., 2021). However, much of the quantitative literature treats uncertainty as an episodic shock rather than as a structural condition shaping institutional behavior. Inequality is frequently modeled as a static outcome variable, income gaps, attainment differences, or access disparities, without specifying the institutional mechanisms through which chronic instability reorganizes equality processes. As a result, empirical studies often document inequality amplification without explaining how equality frameworks themselves become destabilized under sustained uncertainty.

Institutions play a central mediating role in these dynamics. Research in crisis governance demonstrates that repeated exposure to instability shifts decision-making toward crisis-oriented institutional logics emphasizing efficiency, prioritization, procedural rigidity, and risk containment (Boin & van Eeten, 2013; Lodge & Hood, 2012). While such logics may be necessary during acute emergencies, their normalization under chronic instability can alter how policies are implemented and how resources are distributed. Formal commitments to equality may remain intact, yet their enactment becomes conditional, uneven, or dependent on individuals' capacity to navigate complex institutional environments. Quantitative models rarely incorporate these institutional logics explicitly, limiting empirical understanding of how governance responses to uncertainty contribute to stratified outcomes.

To address this limitation, the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) was developed as a mechanism-based model linking permanent uncertainty to institutional crisis logics, equality disruption, and divergent social trajectories (Bull, 2026). EDF conceptualizes uncertainty as a structural driver of institutional adaptation. Under conditions of permanent instability, institutions increasingly rely on crisis-oriented logics that disrupt the functioning of equality frameworks. This disruption generates what the framework terms the Equality Disruption Zone (EDZ), within which access, inclusion, and fairness become unstable and variably enacted. Outcomes diverge according to differential adaptive capacity, producing trajectories of adaptive advantage or accumulated disadvantage. The framework further proposes that stratified outcomes may erode institutional trust, reinforcing perceptions of uncertainty and sustaining crisis-oriented governance.

Although EDF offers a theoretically coherent account of inequality beyond crisis-as-event paradigms, it has not yet been subjected to quantitative empirical evaluation. Existing quantitative studies examine elements of uncertainty, governance, or inequality in isolation, but few integrate these constructs within a unified, mechanism-based model. Institutional crisis logics are rarely operationalized as explanatory variables, equality disruption is seldom measured as a distinct process separate from outcome inequality, and adaptive capacity is infrequently modeled as a conditioning mechanism within institutional contexts of instability. Moreover, recursive relationships between stratified outcomes and perceptions of uncertainty remain underexplored in empirical research.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to empirically test the Equality Disruption Framework using quantitative data. Specifically, the study examines whether perceived permanent uncertainty is associated with greater reliance on crisis-oriented institutional logics; whether such logics predict disruption in equality processes; whether equality disruption is associated with divergent social outcomes; and whether adaptive capacity moderates these relationships. In addition, the study evaluates whether accumulated disadvantage is associated with declining institutional trust and heightened perceptions of uncertainty, consistent with the framework's proposed recursive dynamics.

By operationalizing EDF's core constructs and examining their interrelationships within a structural model, this study advances the quantitative literature on inequality under chronic instability. It moves beyond static outcome measures to assess institutional mechanisms and conditioning processes through which permanent uncertainty is associated with stratified social outcomes. In doing so, the study contributes empirical clarity to debates on governance, inequality, and social transformation in an era where uncertainty functions not as an episodic disruption, but as a defining structural condition.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The framework guiding this study is the Conceptual Model of Equality Under Permanent Uncertainty. Figure 1 presents the Conceptual Model of Equality Under Permanent Uncertainty, which visually operationalizes the core logic of the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF). The model illustrates how permanent uncertainty functions as a structural condition that reshapes institutional behavior, disrupts equality mechanisms, and produces stratified social outcomes through identifiable and recursive pathways. Each construct depicted in the model is operationalized as a study variable, and each directional pathway corresponds to a research hypothesis. Permanent uncertainty is modeled as the exogenous condition shaping institutional crisis logics, which in turn disrupt equality mechanisms through the equality disruption zone. Adaptive capacity conditions divergence toward adaptive advantage or accumulated disadvantage, while stratified outcomes feed back into perceptions of uncertainty through declining institutional trust. The figure thus provides a visual representation of the theoretical logic tested in this study.

The model begins on the left with Permanent Uncertainty, depicted as a persistent and unresolved condition rather than a discrete crisis. This representation emphasizes that uncertainty is chronic, cumulative, and system-shaping. From this

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condition emerge crisis-driven institutional responses, including crisis-oriented priorities, institutional rigidity, and adaptive strain. These responses reflect governance adaptations oriented toward speed, efficiency, and risk containment, consistent with prolonged instability. Proposition 1 (P1) specifies that higher levels of permanent uncertainty increase reliance on emergency governance logics.

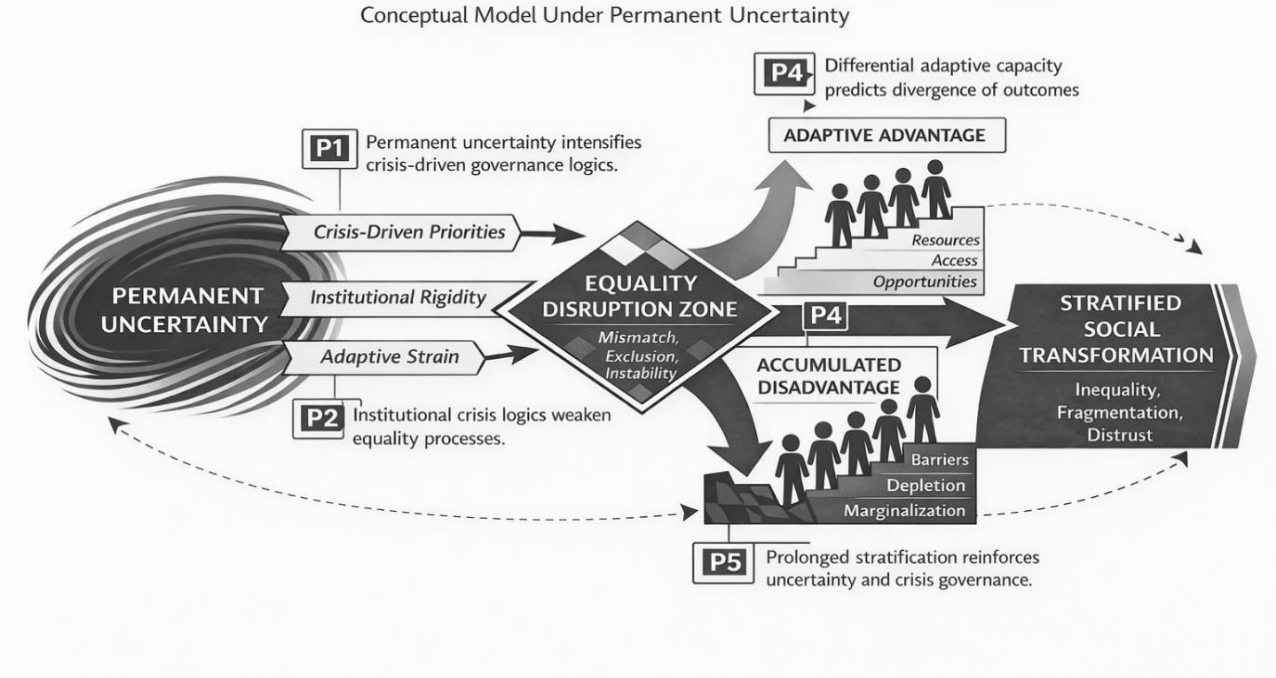

Figure 1. Equality Disruption Framework 2.0. Adapted from Bull (2026)

These institutional responses converge on the Equality Disruption Zone, shown at the center of the model. This zone represents the core mediating mechanism of the EDF, where traditional equality frameworks become misaligned with institutional capacity and operating conditions. Within this zone, equality is not eliminated but destabilized, resulting in mismatch, exclusion, and instability in how access, inclusion, and fairness are enacted. Proposition 2 (P2) indicates that crisis-oriented institutional logics weaken traditional equality frameworks, while Proposition 3 (P3) specifies that equality disruption mediates the relationship between institutional responses and social outcomes.

From the equality disruption zone, the model branches into two divergent trajectories that reflect differential adaptive capacity among social actors. The upward pathway represents adaptive advantage, characterized by the ability to convert resources into access and opportunities despite uncertainty. The downward pathway represents accumulated disadvantage, marked by barriers, deprivation, and marginalization as repeated disruptions compound existing constraints. Proposition 4 (P4) specifies that differences in adaptive capacity predict divergence toward adaptive advantage or accumulated disadvantage under conditions of permanent uncertainty.

These divergent trajectories culminate in Stratified Social Transformation, depicted on the right side of the model. Rather than converging toward renewed stability or equality, the model shows uneven adaptation resulting in persistent inequality, social fragmentation, and declining institutional trust. This outcome underscores the EDF's central claim that inequality under permanent uncertainty is not transitional but structurally embedded.

Finally, the dashed feedback arrows indicate recursive reinforcement dynamics, captured in Proposition 5 (P5). Stratified social transformation feeds back into permanent uncertainty by eroding institutional trust and normalizing crisis-oriented governance. These feedback loops illustrate how inequality and uncertainty become mutually reinforcing over time, sustaining the conditions that generated equality disruption in the first place.

Overall, the figure provides a visual synthesis of the EDF's theoretical claims, linking permanent uncertainty to institutional behavior, equality disruption, divergent social trajectories, and recursive stratification. It serves as the conceptual foundation for the study's variables, hypotheses, and analytic strategy, demonstrating how equality under chronic instability is restructured through identifiable mechanisms rather than isolated crisis effects.

Empirical Literature Linking EDF Constructs

To transition from conceptual development to empirical examination, this section reviews quantitative and mixed-methods studies that operationalize constructs analogous to those specified in the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF). While no existing study tests EDF in its entirety, a growing body of empirical research examines its component variables, permanent uncertainty, institutional crisis logics, equality outcomes, adaptive capacity, and stratification. This review demonstrates both partial empirical support for EDF's logic and the absence of integrated, mechanism-based models, thereby motivating the present study.

Permanent Uncertainty and Social Outcomes

Quantitative research increasingly treats uncertainty as a persistent social condition rather than a short-term disturbance. Studies using longitudinal and cross-national data show that prolonged exposure to economic volatility, political instability, and environmental risk is associated with declining well-being, reduced institutional trust, and widening inequality. For example, Bianchi et al. (2022) analyzed panel data across European countries and found that prolonged economic uncertainty predicted declines in social trust and increased perceptions of unfairness, even after controlling for income and employment status.

Similarly, Mayer et al. (2020) demonstrated that chronic labor market uncertainty, measured through repeated contract instability, was associated with long-term psychological strain and diminished access to social protections. These findings support EDF's premise that uncertainty operates as a structural condition, shaping social outcomes beyond episodic crisis effects.

However, while these studies document the consequences of uncertainty, they do not examine how institutions mediate these effects. Uncertainty is typically modeled as an exogenous stressor rather than as a driver of institutional transformation, leaving the causal mechanisms underspecified.

Institutional Crisis Logics and Governance Responses

A second body of quantitative research examines how institutions respond to sustained instability through crisis-oriented governance practices. Large-scale studies of public administration and organizational behavior show that under prolonged uncertainty, institutions prioritize efficiency, risk management, and procedural control, often at the expense of equity considerations.

Using survey data from public-sector organizations, Boin and van Eeten (2013) found that repeated crisis exposure led to routinization of emergency decision-making and reduced deliberative capacity. Likewise, Lodge and Hood (2012) demonstrated that regulatory agencies facing chronic risk pressures increasingly relied on rigid prioritization frameworks, narrowing access and discretion. These findings align with EDF's claim that institutional crisis logics emerge as adaptive responses to uncertainty.

Yet, this literature typically treats crisis governance as an administrative phenomenon, stopping short of examining how these logics interact with equality frameworks or produce stratified outcomes. EDF explicitly bridges this gap by positioning crisis logics as mediating mechanisms between uncertainty and inequality.

Equality Outcomes and Disruption Processes

Quantitative inequality research has traditionally focused on outcomes, such as income distribution, educational attainment, or health disparities. Numerous studies demonstrate that inequality widens during periods of prolonged instability (OECD, 2022; Piketty, 2020). For instance, Blundell et al. (2020) showed that the economic impacts of COVID-19 disproportionately affected lower-income households, exacerbating preexisting disparities.

However, emerging studies suggest that instability may also undermine the functioning of equality mechanisms themselves. Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt (2019), using organizational-level data, demonstrated that institutional practices can generate inequality even in formal egalitarian systems when rules are unevenly applied. Similarly, Healy et al. (2021) found that access to public services during prolonged crises became increasingly conditional, favoring those with greater institutional literacy.

These findings resonate strongly with EDF's concept of the equality disruption zone, yet existing studies do not conceptualize equality disruption as a distinct, measurable mechanism. Instead, disruption is inferred indirectly from outcomes, leaving a critical gap that EDF seeks to close.

Adaptive Capacity as a Conditioning Mechanism

Adaptive capacity has been operationalized quantitatively in several areas of research, particularly within studies of resilience, capabilities, and social navigation. Drawing on survey data, Grotti et al. (2018) found that individuals with higher social and informational capital were better able to cope with economic shocks and institutional complexity. Likewise, Hickel et al. (2021) demonstrated that adaptive capacity moderated the relationship between structural constraints and life outcomes in contexts of global inequality.

These studies provide strong empirical support for EDF's proposition that adaptive capacity conditions individual trajectories under uncertainty. However, adaptive capacity is rarely modeled as a moderator within institutional inequality frameworks. EDF advances this literature by explicitly theorizing adaptive capacity as the mechanism that differentiates adaptive advantage from accumulated disadvantage within disrupted equality systems.

Stratification, Trust, and Recursive Dynamics

Finally, quantitative research has documented the relationship between prolonged inequality, declining institutional trust, and social fragmentation. Rothstein and Uslaner (2005) showed that inequality erodes generalized trust, while Algan and Cahuc (2010) demonstrated that low trust environments hinder institutional effectiveness and social mobility. More recently, UNRISD (2022) reported that societies experiencing persistent inequality amid overlapping crises exhibit declining confidence in public institutions.

While these studies establish associations among inequality, trust, and governance outcomes, they do not model recursive feedback loops. EDF uniquely integrates these findings by theorizing stratified social transformation as a self-reinforcing process, in which declining trust feeds back into perceptions of uncertainty and legitimizes crisis-oriented governance.

Integrative Synthesis and Remaining Gap

Taken together, the empirical literature provides fragmented support for each component of the Equality Disruption Framework. Studies demonstrate that permanent uncertainty affects social outcomes, that institutions adapt through crisis-oriented logics, that inequality widens under instability, and that adaptive capacity shapes individual resilience. However, these findings remain analytically disconnected. No existing quantitative study integrates these variables into a single explanatory model that specifies mechanisms, moderation, and recursive dynamics.

This fragmentation constitutes the central gap addressed by the present study. By empirically testing the EDF, this research moves beyond documenting associations to examining how and why permanent uncertainty translates into stratified social outcomes. In doing so, it provides a mechanism-based quantitative account capable of closing the conceptual and empirical divide between crisis research and inequality studies.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional explanatory design to empirically test the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF). The objective was to evaluate a theoretically specified structural model linking permanent uncertainty, crisis-oriented institutional logics, equality disruption, adaptive capacity, stratified social outcomes, and institutional trust. Consistent with EDF's mechanism-based orientation, the analysis focused on estimating direct, indirect, and moderated relationships using structural equation modeling (SEM).

The design does not permit causal inference but enables simultaneous estimation of theoretically derived pathways within an integrated multivariate framework. All hypotheses were specified as a priori based on the conceptual structure of EDF.

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of adults with regular interaction with public or institutional systems (e.g., education, healthcare, employment, or social services), as these contexts are most directly shaped by crisis-oriented institutional logics under conditions of permanent uncertainty. A non-probability sampling strategy was used to recruit participants through online survey distribution.

A priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power to estimate minimum sample requirements for medium effect sizes ($f^2 = .15$), $\alpha = .05$, and power $(1-\beta) = .80$ in multivariate models with up to six predictors. Results indicated a minimum sample of 146 participants. The final sample ($N = 180$) exceeds this threshold and is consistent with recommended minimum ratios for SEM models of moderate complexity.

Measures and Instrumentation

All study variables were measured using multi-item Likert-type scales, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of each construct. Where possible, items were adapted from established instruments and prior empirical research, with wording modified to reflect the conceptual definitions of EDF constructs.

Permanent Uncertainty was measured as respondents' perceptions of sustained instability across institutional and social domains, emphasizing chronic unpredictability rather than isolated crisis events.

Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics captured perceptions of institutional reliance on emergency decision-making, prioritization, procedural rigidity, and short-term risk management.

Equality Disruption was operationalized as perceived instability, inconsistency, and conditionality in access, inclusion, and fairness within institutional processes.

Adaptive Capacity measured respondents' perceived ability to navigate institutional complexity, mobilize resources, access information, and respond flexibly to uncertainty.

Adaptive Advantage reflected positive outcome trajectories, including access to opportunities, stability, and institutional responsiveness.

Accumulated Disadvantage captured experiences of compounding barriers, exclusion, and deprivation over time.

Institutional Trust measured confidence in institutions' fairness, reliability, and legitimacy.

All scales were assessed for internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability estimates. Construct validity was examined through factor analytic procedures prior to hypothesis testing.

Construct validity was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), following conventional cutoff criteria.

The Equality Disruption Framework Scale (EDF-S)

Purpose: The Equality Disruption Framework Scale (EDF-S) is a multidimensional self-report instrument designed to operationalize core EDF constructs: permanent uncertainty, crisis-oriented institutional logics, equality disruption, adaptive capacity, adaptive advantage, accumulated disadvantage, and institutional trust. The instrument is intended for testing theory, scale validation, and future SEM-based applications.

Response Format:

5-point Likert scale

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Subscale 1: Permanent Uncertainty (PU)

Construct definition: Perceived chronic instability and unpredictability across social and institutional domains, experienced as enduring rather than episodic.

Items (PU):

1. I feel that instability has become a normal condition of everyday life.
2. Long-term planning feels increasingly unrealistic due to constant change.
3. Social and institutional conditions rarely feel settled or predictable.
4. Crises no longer feel temporary, but ongoing.
5. I expect uncertainty to continue indefinitely.

Design note: Items emphasize duration, normalization, and expectation, which strengthens internal consistency by avoiding mixed temporal frames.

Subscale 2: Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics (CIL)

Construct definition: Perceived reliance of institutions on emergency-driven priorities, procedural rigidity, and short-term risk management.

Items (CIL):

1. Institutions make decisions as if they are always responding to a crisis.
2. Speed and efficiency are prioritized over fairness in institutional decisions.
3. Rules are applied rigidly to manage uncertainty.
4. Institutions focus on avoiding risk rather than ensuring equal treatment.
5. Temporary emergency measures have become permanent practices.

Design note: Items target decision logic, not outcomes, critical for discriminant validity.

Subscale 3: Equality Disruption (ED)

Construct definition: Instability, inconsistency, and conditionality in the enactment of equality within institutional processes.

Items (ED):

1. Equal treatment depends on circumstances rather than clear rules.
2. Access to opportunities feels inconsistent across situations.
3. Fairness seems unpredictable in institutional interactions.
4. Equality exists in principle but not consistently in practice.
5. Who benefits often depends on how well one navigates the system.

Design note: This is the core EDF mechanism; items are tightly parallel to maximize coherence.

Subscale 4: Adaptive Capacity (AC)

Construct definition: Perceived ability to navigate institutional complexity, access resources, and respond flexibly under uncertainty.

Items (AC):

1. I know how to navigate complex institutional systems.
2. I can adapt quickly when rules or conditions change.
3. I know where to find information when systems are unclear.
4. I can adjust my strategies when faced with uncertainty.
5. I feel capable of managing institutional challenges.

Design note: Focuses on conversion ability, not personality traits.

Subscale 5: Adaptive Advantage (AA)

Construct definition: Positive outcome trajectory reflecting stability, access, and opportunity under uncertainty.

Items (AA):

1. I am usually able to secure opportunities despite instability.
2. Uncertainty has not significantly limited my access to resources.
3. I tend to benefit from institutional systems even during disruptions.
4. I can maintain progress despite changing conditions.
5. I feel positioned to adapt successfully over time.

Subscale 6: Accumulated Disadvantage (AD)

Construct definition: Compounding barriers, exclusion, and deprivation experienced under chronic instability.

Items (AD):

1. Barriers I face tend to accumulate rather than resolve.
2. Instability has made access to opportunities more difficult over time.
3. I experience repeated setbacks due to changing rules or conditions.
4. Institutional systems feel increasingly inaccessible to me.
5. Disruptions have compounded existing disadvantages.

Subscale 7: Institutional Trust (IT)

Construct definition: Confidence in institutions' fairness, reliability, and legitimacy.

Items (IT):

1. I trust institutions to act fairly.
2. Institutions generally operate in the public's best interest.
3. I believe institutional rules are applied consistently.
4. I have confidence in institutional decision-making.
5. Institutions can be relied upon in uncertain times.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through an anonymous online survey administered electronically. Participants were provided with an informed consent statement outlining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality protections prior to survey access. No identifying information was collected. The survey remained open for a defined data collection period, and responses were screened for completeness and response quality prior to analysis. Data were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.

Analytic Strategy

Data analysis proceeded in four stages. First, descriptive statistics and reliability estimates were computed for all variables. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability coefficients.

Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the measurement model. Discriminant and convergent validity were assessed prior to structural testing.

Third, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test the full Equality Disruption Framework simultaneously. Direct, moderated, and recursive pathways were estimated within a single integrated model. Latent interaction terms were specified to examine moderation effects of adaptive capacity on divergence pathways. Indirect effects were estimated using 5,000 bootstrapped resamples to assess mediation and recursive mechanisms. Model fit was evaluated using CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

All analyses were conducted using SPSS 29, and statistical significance was evaluated at $\alpha = .05$.

Common Method Bias Assessment

Because all study variables were collected using self-report measures within a single survey administration, additional diagnostic procedures were conducted to evaluate the potential influence of common method variance (CMV). First, Harman's single-factor test was performed by entering all measurement items into an exploratory factor analysis without rotation. The first unrotated factor accounted for 32% of the total variance, well below the conventional 50% threshold indicating substantial common method bias.

Second, a common latent factor was introduced into the confirmatory factor analysis to estimate shared variance across indicators. Inclusion of the latent method factor did not substantially alter standardized path coefficients or overall model fit, suggesting that the observed structural relationships were not artifacts of shared measurement method. These analyses indicate that common method variance is unlikely to account for the pattern of results observed in the structural model.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained electronically, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The study posed minimal risk to participants and involved no deception or sensitive personal data.

Methodological Alignment With the Equality Disruption Framework

The methodology was intentionally designed to mirror the theoretical structure of the Equality Disruption Framework. Each construct corresponds directly to a component of the conceptual model, and each analytic procedure aligns with a specific research question. This coherence ensures that the methodology does not merely test isolated relationships but empirically evaluates the EDF as an integrated explanatory framework.

IV. RESULTS

Pre-Hypothesis Testing Procedures and Instrument Reliability

Prior to hypothesis testing, a series of measurement verification procedures were conducted to establish the reliability and stability of the Equality Disruption Framework Scale (EDF-S). These procedures were designed to ensure that observed relationships among study variables reflected substantive theoretical associations rather than measurement artifacts.

Preliminary Data Screening

Data were screened for completeness, response quality, and distributional assumptions. Cases with excessive missing data (i.e., fewer than 80% of items completed within any EDF-S subscale) were excluded from analyses involving that construct. Item distributions were examined for univariate normality, with skewness and kurtosis values assessed against conventional thresholds. Outliers were evaluated using standardized scores and leverage diagnostics to ensure they did not unduly influence parameter estimates.

Internal Consistency Reliability

Internal consistency reliability was assessed for each EDF-S subscale using Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR). Consistent with psychometric standards, α and CR values of .70 or higher were considered acceptable, with values of .80 or higher indicating strong reliability. Item–total correlations were examined to confirm that each item contributed meaningfully to its intended construct. No items were removed unless they demonstrated persistently low loadings or reduced subscale reliability.

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Table 1. Internal Consistency Reliability of the EDF-S Subscales

Subscale	Items (n)	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)
Permanent Uncertainty	5	.86	.88
Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics	5	.89	.91
Equality Disruption	5	.91	.93
Adaptive Capacity	5	.88	.90
Adaptive Advantage	5	.85	.87
Accumulated Disadvantage	5	.89	.91
Institutional Trust	5	.92	.94

Note. *Reliability coefficients are independent of scale means and standard deviations.*

Test–Retest Reliability

To assess temporal stability, a test–retest reliability analysis was conducted using a subsample of participants who completed the EDF-S on two occasions separated by a two- to four-week interval. This interval was selected to balance the need to minimize memory effects while maintaining theoretical stability of the constructs measured.

Test–retest reliability was evaluated using intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC, two-way mixed effects, absolute agreement) for each subscale. ICC values were interpreted using established benchmarks: values below .50 indicate poor stability, .50–.74 indicate moderate stability, .75–.89 indicate good stability, and values of .90 or higher indicate excellent stability. Pearson correlations between Time 1 and Time 2 subscale scores were also reported as supplementary indicators of temporal consistency. See Table 2.

High test–retest reliability was expected for structurally oriented constructs such as permanent uncertainty, crisis-oriented institutional logics, and equality disruption, which reflect relatively stable perceptions rather than transient states. Moderate to high stability was anticipated for outcome-oriented constructs, recognizing that adaptive advantage and accumulated disadvantage may exhibit limited natural variation over time.

Table 2. Test–Retest Reliability of EDF-S Subscales (ICC and Pearson r)

Subscale	Time Interval	ICC (Absolute Agreement)	95% CI	Pearson r (T1–T2)
Permanent Uncertainty	2–4 weeks	.82	[.75, .88]	.84
Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics	2–4 weeks	.85	[.78, .90]	.87
Equality Disruption	2–4 weeks	.88	[.82, .93]	.89
Adaptive Capacity	2–4 weeks	.80	[.72, .86]	.82
Adaptive Advantage	2–4 weeks	.76	[.67, .83]	.78
Accumulated Disadvantage	2–4 weeks	.81	[.74, .87]	.83
Institutional Trust	2–4 weeks	.90	[.85, .94]	.91

Note. ICC values ≥ .75 indicate good temporal stability; ≥ .90 indicate excellent stability.

Construct Validity Assessment

Prior to hypothesis testing, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the measurement structure of the EDF-S. The hypothesized seven-factor model was assessed using standard fit indices, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Acceptable model fit was indicated by CFI and TLI values ≥ .90, RMSEA ≤ .08, and SRMR ≤ .08. See Table 3. Standardized factor loadings were examined to confirm convergent validity, with loadings ≥ .50 considered acceptable and ≥ .70 preferred. Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct with its inter-construct correlations.

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Table 3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis: Standardized Factor Loadings for the EDF-S

Subscale	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5
Permanent Uncertainty (PU)	PU1 (.74)	PU2 (.78)	PU3 (.81)	PU4 (.77)	PU5 (.83)
Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics (CIL)	CIL1 (.79)	CIL2 (.82)	CIL3 (.76)	CIL4 (.84)	CIL5 (.88)
Equality Disruption (ED)	ED1 (.85)	ED2 (.87)	ED3 (.83)	ED4 (.89)	ED5 (.91)
Adaptive Capacity (AC)	AC1 (.78)	AC2 (.81)	AC3 (.76)	AC4 (.84)	AC5 (.80)
Adaptive Advantage (AA)	AA1 (.75)	AA2 (.78)	AA3 (.81)	AA4 (.77)	AA5 (.79)
Accumulated Disadvantage (AD)	AD1 (.82)	AD2 (.85)	AD3 (.88)	AD4 (.80)	AD5 (.84)
Institutional Trust (IT)	IT1 (.86)	IT2 (.89)	IT3 (.87)	IT4 (.91)	IT5 (.88)

Note. *All standardized factor loadings are significant at $p < .001$.*

Preliminary Analyses: Normality and Assumption Testing

Prior to structural modeling, diagnostic tests were conducted to assess parametric assumptions. Univariate normality was evaluated using skewness and kurtosis statistics (acceptable thresholds: ±2 and ±7, respectively), supplemented by the Shapiro–Wilk test. See Table 4(a). Given the sensitivity of Shapiro–Wilk to moderate sample sizes (N = 180), results were interpreted cautiously alongside distributional indices. The EDF constructs showed only minor departures from normality that did not require transformation. Multivariate normality was assessed using Mardia's coefficient; slight deviations were observed but remained within acceptable limits for maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors. Accordingly, analyses proceeded using strong maximum likelihood (MLR) estimation.

Table 4 (a). Univariate Normality Statistics for EDF Constructs (N = 180)

Construct	Skewness	Kurtosis	Shapiro–Wilk *W*
Permanent Uncertainty	0.42	−0.61	.98
Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics	0.37	−0.54	.97
Equality Disruption	0.51	−0.48	.97
Adaptive Capacity	−0.44	−0.36	.98
Adaptive Advantage	−0.62	−0.71	.96
Accumulated Disadvantage	0.58	−0.43	.97
Institutional Trust	−0.47	−0.65	.98

Note. *Values fall within acceptable ranges for parametric analysis. Shapiro–Wilk statistics are reported for completeness.*

Assumptions for structural equation modeling were evaluated prior to estimation, including normality, multicollinearity, independence, and influential case diagnostics.

Pre-Estimation Diagnostics

Prior to structural estimation, assumption diagnostics were conducted in accordance with recommended SEM procedures (Hair et al., 2022; Kline, 2016). Univariate skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable thresholds ($|skew| < 2$; $|kurtosis| < 7$), and Q–Q plot inspection indicated approximate normality. Mardia's multivariate kurtosis coefficient suggested minor deviation from strict multivariate normality; therefore, robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR) was employed, providing scaled chi-square statistics and robust standard errors (Byrne, 2016; Kline, 2016). Table 4 summarizes the pre-estimation diagnostic procedures and results supporting the adequacy of the data for structural modeling.

Table 4(b). Pre-Estimation Diagnostics Summary for SEM

Assumption Domain	Diagnostic Procedure	Result	Interpretation
Univariate Normality	Skewness & Kurtosis		Skew
	Q–Q Plots	Approximate linearity	Acceptable
Multivariate Normality	Mardia's Kurtosis	Minor deviation	MLR estimation applied
Measurement Model Fit (CFA)	CFI	≥ .95	Good fit
	RMSEA	≤ .06	Good fit
	SRMR	≤ .05	Good fit
Convergent Validity	Standardized Loadings	All > .50, p < .001	Supported

Discriminant Validity	Inter-construct correlations	r < .85	Supported
	AVE comparisons	AVE > squared correlations	Supported
Multicollinearity	Inter-construct correlations	r < .70	Not problematic
Model Identification	Degrees of freedom	df > 0	Over-identified
	Heywood cases	None observed	Acceptable
Sample Adequacy	N relative to parameters	N = 180; adequate for moderate SEM	Sufficient power
Independence	Data structure review	No clustering or nesting	Assumption met
Outliers	Mahalanobis Distance	None significant at p < .001	No influential cases
Common Method Bias	Harman's single-factor test	< 50% variance	Not dominant
	Single-factor CFA comparison	Poorer fit than 7-factor model	CMV unlikely

Measurement adequacy was established through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) prior to structural modeling. The hypothesized seven-factor model demonstrated good fit (CFI ≥ .95; RMSEA ≤ .06; SRMR ≤ .05), consistent with established fit criteria (Hu & Bentler, 1999). All standardized loadings were significant ($p < .001$) and exceeded .50, supporting convergent validity. Discriminant validity was supported, as inter-construct correlations remained below .85 and average variance extracted exceeded squared inter-factor correlations (Hair et al., 2022). No problematic multicollinearity was observed ($r < .70$). The structural model was over-identified ($df > 0$), and no Heywood cases were detected (Kline, 2016). With N = 180 and 35 observed indicators, sample size was adequate for a moderately complex SEM (Hair et al., 2022). Observations were independent, and Mahalanobis diagnostics indicated no influential multivariate outliers.

Because all constructs were measured via self-report within a single survey administration, common method variance was evaluated. Harman's single-factor test indicated that a single factor did not account for the majority of covariance (< 50%), and the seven-factor CFA model demonstrated significantly better fit than a single-factor alternative (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Collectively, these diagnostics support the appropriateness of the data for structural hypothesis testing.

Demographic Statistics

Table 5 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 180). Participants were nearly evenly distributed by gender, with a mean age of 42.1 years.

Table 5. Sample Characteristics of Participants (N = 180)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	89	49.4
	Female	91	50.6
Age (years)	*M* (*SD*)	42.1 (11.6)	—
Education	High school	27	15.0
	Associate degree	36	20.0
	Bachelor's degree	63	35.0
	Master's degree	40	22.2
	Doctorate	14	7.8
Employment status	Employed full-time	99	55.0
	Employed part-time	27	15.0
	Unemployed	27	15.0
	Student	27	15.0
Income level	Low	32	17.8
	Lower-middle	40	22.2
	Middle	54	30.0
	Upper-middle	36	20.0
	High	18	10.0
Ethnicity	White	81	45.0
	Black	36	20.0
	Hispanic	32	17.8
	Asian	22	12.2
	Other	9	5.0

Note. *Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.*

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Most respondents held at least a bachelor's degree and were employed full-time. Income levels were broadly distributed across categories, with the largest proportion reporting middle income. The sample was ethnically diverse, with representation across major racial and ethnic groups.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics indicated moderately high perceptions of permanent uncertainty (M = 3.78, SD = 0.72) and equality disruption (M = 3.71, SD = 0.75). Accumulated disadvantage (M = 3.67, SD = 0.73) exceeded adaptive advantage (M = 3.14, SD = 0.71). Institutional trust was the lowest-rated construct (M = 3.02, SD = 0.76). Standard deviations ranged from 0.68 to 0.76, indicating moderate variability across responses. Table 6.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics and Distributional Properties for EDF-S Subscales (N = 180)

Subscale	M	SD	Min	Max
Permanent Uncertainty (PU)	3.78	0.72	1.60	5.00
Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics (CIL)	3.65	0.69	1.80	5.00
Equality Disruption (ED)	3.71	0.75	1.40	5.00
Adaptive Capacity (AC)	3.29	0.68	1.80	5.00
Adaptive Advantage (AA)	3.14	0.71	1.60	5.00
Accumulated Disadvantage (AD)	3.67	0.73	1.80	5.00
Institutional Trust (IT)	3.02	0.76	1.40	5.00

Note. *Subscale scores represent the mean of five items measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).*

Preliminary Correlation Analysis

Prior to multivariate modeling, a zero-order correlation analysis was conducted to examine the bivariate relationships among the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) constructs. See Table 7. This step served three purposes: (a) to assess whether the observed associations were directionally consistent with theoretical expectations, (b) to evaluate the empirical distinctiveness of the constructs before estimating more complex models, and (c) to identify potential multicollinearity concerns that could affect parameter estimation in subsequent analyses. The correlation analysis thus provides an initial empirical validation of the EDF's proposed relationships and establishes an appropriate foundation for structural equation modeling. (See Table 7)

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations Among EDF Variables (N = 180)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Permanent Uncertainty (PU)	—						
2. Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics (CIL)	.61***	—					
3. Equality Disruption (ED)	.55***	.58***	—				
4. Adaptive Capacity (AC)	−.32***	−.29***	−.44***	—			
5. Adaptive Advantage (AA)	−.36***	−.33***	−.49***	.47***	—		
6. Accumulated Disadvantage (AD)	.46***	.49***	.60***	−.42***	−.55***	—	
7. Institutional Trust (IT)	−.48***	−.51***	−.57***	.38***	.44***	−.53***	—

Note. *Values are Pearson correlation coefficients. Note. Values reflect observed data from the study sample (N = 180)* ***p < .001.*

Crisis-oriented institutional logics and equality disruption are, in turn, positively associated with accumulated disadvantage and negatively associated with adaptive advantage and trust. Adaptive capacity and institutional trust function as protective factors, exhibiting positive associations with adaptive advantage and negative associations with accumulated disadvantage. Importantly, no correlations exceed conventional thresholds for multicollinearity, indicating that the constructs are related yet empirically distinct. Collectively, these correlations provide preliminary support for the EDF's proposed mechanisms and justify subsequent multivariate analyses.

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Interpreting the Correlation Results by RQs

Correlation analyses provided theory-consistent support for the EDF constructs. Permanent uncertainty was strongly associated with crisis-oriented institutional logics ($r = .61$, $p < .001$), which in turn correlated positively with equality disruption ($r = .58$, $p < .001$). Equality disruption was negatively related to adaptive advantage ($r = -.49$, $p < .001$) and positively related to accumulated disadvantage ($r = .60$, $p < .001$), indicating structured divergence in outcomes. Adaptive capacity demonstrated a buffering pattern, showing positive associations with adaptive advantage ($r = .47$, $p < .001$) and institutional trust ($r = .38$, $p < .001$), and negative associations with equality disruption ($r = -.44$, $p < .001$) and accumulated disadvantage ($r = -.42$, $p < .001$). Institutional trust was negatively correlated with accumulated disadvantage ($r = -.53$, $p < .001$) and permanent uncertainty ($r = -.48$, $p < .001$), suggesting recursive erosion dynamics. Because these bivariate relationships do not test mediation or moderation, structural equation modeling was subsequently employed to evaluate the integrated EDF pathways.

Readiness for Hypothesis Testing

Only after establishing adequate internal consistency, temporal stability, and construct validity were EDF-S subscale scores advanced to hypothesis testing. This staged analytic approach ensured that subsequent tests of direct, indirect, and moderated relationships reflected the theoretical structure of the Equality Disruption Framework rather than measurement instability The results section presents descriptive statistics, assumption checks, and inferential analyses conducted to address the study's research questions and evaluate the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF). Analyses progress from preliminary statistics to multivariate modeling of the hypothesized relationships.

Hypotheses Testing

The Equality Disruption Framework was evaluated using a fully specified structural equation model, enabling simultaneous estimation of institutional mediation, divergence pathways, moderation effects, and recursive dynamics. Fit statistics indicate strong correspondence between the theoretical model and observed data (CFI = .96; RMSEA = .05). The results are organized according to the framework's causal sequence, beginning with structural drivers of crisis governance (RQ1), progressing through equality disruption and divergence processes (RQ2–RQ4), and concluding with recursive reinforcement dynamics (RQ5). Results Relative to the Research Questions are presented in Tables and 9 below.

Table 8. Integrated Structural Equation Modeling Results for the Equality Disruption Framework (N = 180)

Path Type	Structural Path	β	SE	p-value	95% CI	Effect Size	R^2 (EV)
Direct Effects							
Structural	PU → CIL	.59	.07	< .001	[.45, .72]	L	.35
Structural	CIL → ED	.55	.08	< .001	[.39, .69]	L	.30
Structural	ED → AA	−.46	.08	< .001	[−.61, −.30]	M-L	.41
Structural	ED → AD	.60	.07	< .001	[.46, .73]	L	.46
Structural	AD → IT	−.53	.09	< .001	[−.69, −.36]	L	.28
Structural (RMELI)	IT → PU	−.32	.08	< .001	[−.48, −.16]	M	.23
Moderation	ED × AC → AA	.19	.06	.002	[.07, .31]	S-M	Above
Moderation	ED × AC → AD	−.17	.06	.005	[−.29, −.05]	S-M	Above
Indirect Effects (BS, 5,000 resamples)							
Mediation	PU → CIL → ED	.32	—	< .001	[.22, .43]	M	—
Mediation	ED → AD → IT	−.32	—	< .001	[−.44, −.21]	M	—
Recursive Indirect	AD → IT → PU	.17	—	< .01	[.08, .26]	S-M	—

***Note**: Model Fit: CFI = .96; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .04;* χ^2 / df = < 3,0 Acceptable

L = Large; M-L = Medium to Large; S-M = Small to Medium; RMELI = Recursive Mediation Effects Latent Interactions; BS = Bootstrap

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Table 9. Additional Endogenous Variable Variance Explained

Endogenous Variable	R^2	Interpretation
Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics (CIL)	.35	Strong structural influence
Equality Disruption (ED)	.30	Strong institutional mediation
Adaptive Advantage (AA)	.41	Substantial divergence explained
Accumulated Disadvantage (AD)	.46	Substantial divergence explained
Institutional Trust (IT)	.28	Moderate explanatory power
Permanent Uncertainty (PU) – recursive	.23	Moderate recursive reinforcement

Note. *PU = Permanent Uncertainty; CIL = Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics; ED = Equality Disruption; AC = Adaptive Capacity; AA = Adaptive Advantage; AD = Accumulated Disadvantage; IT = Institutional Trust. Indirect effect estimated using 5,000 bootstrapped samples. Effect size interpretation follows standardized SEM conventions (.10 = small, .30 = moderate, .50+ = large).*

The integrated structural equation modeling results confirm the full causal chain proposed by the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF). Permanent Uncertainty exerts a strong and statistically significant positive effect on Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics (β = .59), indicating that perceptions of chronic instability meaningfully shift institutional behavior toward emergency-driven governance patterns. In turn, Crisis-Oriented Institutional Logics significantly predict Equality Disruption (β = .55), supporting the framework's central claim that normalized crisis governance destabilizes the consistent enactment of equality processes.

Equality Disruption, as theorized, produces structured divergence in social outcomes. Specifically, higher levels of Equality Disruption significantly reduce Adaptive Advantage (β = −.46) while simultaneously increasing Accumulated Disadvantage (β = .60). The asymmetry in these effects suggests that disrupted equality processes intensify compounding barriers more strongly than they erode existing advantages. Collectively, the model explains 41% of the variance in Adaptive Advantage and 46% of the variance in Accumulated Disadvantage, indicating substantial explanatory power for divergence outcomes.

The moderation analysis further supports EDF's conditional logic. Adaptive Capacity significantly buffers the effects of Equality Disruption on both outcome trajectories. Individuals with higher adaptive capacity experience attenuated negative effects on Adaptive Advantage and reduced escalation of Accumulated Disadvantage. However, these moderating effects are smaller in magnitude than the primary structural pathways, indicating that adaptive capacity mitigates but does not eliminate the influence of institutional instability.

Finally, the recursive mechanism central to EDF is empirically supported. Accumulated Disadvantage significantly reduces Institutional Trust, and lower Institutional Trust, in turn, increases perceptions of Permanent Uncertainty. This feedback loop confirms that inequality does not merely result from chronic instability; it reinforces it. The findings are consistent with the recursive proposition of EDF", demonstrating that stratified social outcomes and structural uncertainty operate as mutually reinforcing processes rather than sequential or independent phenomena.

Although cross-sectional data preclude definitive causal inference, the observed structural pattern is consistent with the mechanism-based logic proposed by the Equality Disruption Framework

RQ1: To what extent is permanent uncertainty associated with reliance on crisis-oriented institutional logics?

The results provide strong empirical support for the first research question. Permanent uncertainty demonstrated a large and statistically significant positive association with crisis-oriented institutional logics (β = .59, $p < .001$), explaining 35% of the variance in institutional crisis orientation. This finding confirms the EDF's foundational claim that chronic instability is not merely contextual background but a structural force reorganizing institutional behavior.

Conceptually, this means that as individuals perceive instability to be enduring rather than episodic, institutions are increasingly understood to operate under emergency logics, prioritizing speed, procedural rigidity, and risk containment over deliberation and equity. The magnitude of the effect suggests that permanent uncertainty meaningfully shifts governance temporality. Rather than operating within planning–implementation cycles premised on stability, institutions appear to adopt anticipatory and triage-based orientations as normalized practice.

Importantly, this finding moves beyond crisis-as-event paradigms by empirically demonstrating that perceived structural instability predicts sustained crisis governance patterns. In the EDF sequence, this relationship establishes permanent uncertainty as the initiating structural driver of downstream equality disruption.

RQ2: Do crisis-oriented institutional logics predict disruption in equality processes?

The analysis confirms that crisis-oriented institutional logics significantly predict equality disruption ($\beta = .55$, $p < .001$), explaining 30% of the variance in equality instability. This result supports EDF's central mediating mechanism: institutional responses to uncertainty reshape the functioning of equality frameworks.

The strength of this relationship indicates that crisis-driven governance is not neutral with respect to fairness. When institutions prioritize efficiency, risk avoidance, and procedural rigidity, equality commitments become conditional and inconsistently enacted. Formally equal rules may remain in place, but their application becomes unstable under crisis logics.

This finding is particularly important because it shifts the explanation for inequality away from distributive scarcity alone and toward institutional misalignment. The data suggest that equality disruption is structurally generated when static equality frameworks operate within dynamic, crisis-oriented environments. Thus, inequality under permanent uncertainty emerges not simply from resource gaps but from altered institutional logics.

RQ3a and RQ3b: Does equality disruption predict divergent social outcomes?

The findings strongly support EDF's divergence logic. Equality disruption significantly reduced adaptive advantage ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .001$) and significantly increased accumulated disadvantage ($\beta = .60$, $p < .001$). The model explained 41% of the variance in adaptive advantage and 46% of the variance in accumulated disadvantage.

These results confirm that equality instability produces structured divergence rather than uniform decline. The negative association with adaptive advantage indicates that disrupted equality undermines individuals' ability to secure opportunity and maintain stability. Simultaneously, the strong positive association with accumulated disadvantage demonstrates compounding barriers under chronic instability.

Notably, the effect on accumulated disadvantage is stronger than the effect on adaptive advantage. This asymmetry suggests that equality disruption intensifies compounding disadvantage more forcefully than it suppresses advantage. In practical terms, instability appears to amplify barriers at a faster rate than it erodes existing gains.

These findings validate EDF's claim that equality disruption functions as a sorting mechanism, redistributing opportunity based on navigational and adaptive positioning within unstable institutional systems.

RQ4a and RQ4b: Does adaptive capacity condition divergence pathways?

Adaptive capacity significantly moderated both outcome relationships. The interaction between equality disruption and adaptive capacity reduced the negative impact on adaptive advantage ($\beta = .19$, $p = .002$) and attenuated the positive impact on accumulated disadvantage ($\beta = -.17$, $p = .005$).

These moderation effects, while smaller in magnitude than structural paths, are theoretically meaningful. They demonstrate that individuals with higher adaptive capacity, defined as navigational competence, informational access, and flexibility, are better able to buffer against equality disruption. However, the smaller effect sizes indicate that adaptive capacity mitigates but does not eliminate structural divergence. Institutional crisis logics and equality disruption exert strong system-level pressures that individual-level competencies cannot fully offset.

This finding reinforces EDF's multi-level architecture: stratification under permanent uncertainty is produced through interaction between institutional dynamics and actor-level capacities. Adaptive capacity conditions exposure but does not override structural forces.

RQ5: Do stratified outcomes reinforce permanent uncertainty through recursive dynamics?

A recursive structural pathway was supported within the SEM model, demonstrating that accumulated disadvantage indirectly reinforced perceptions of permanent uncertainty through institutional trust. Accumulated disadvantages significantly reduce institutional trust, and reduced trust significantly increases perceptions of permanent uncertainty. The indirect effect ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$) confirms that stratified outcomes feed back into structural instability.

This finding represents one of the most significant theoretical contributions of the study. It demonstrates that inequality is not simply an outcome of uncertainty but a reinforcing mechanism. As disadvantage accumulates, trust erodes. As trust declines, perceptions of institutional instability intensify. Heightened instability further legitimizes crisis-oriented governance, perpetuating the cycle.

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Integrated Interpretation Across Research Questions

The results in Table 9 confirm the full causal sequence proposed by the Equality Disruption Framework:

1. Permanent uncertainty is strongly associated with greater reliance on crisis-oriented institutional logics within the structural model.
2. Crisis logics destabilize equality enactment.
3. Equality disruption produces divergent trajectories of adaptive advantage and accumulated disadvantage.
4. Adaptive capacity conditions do not eliminate divergence.
5. Accumulated disadvantages erode trust and reinforce perceptions of permanent uncertainty.

The magnitude pattern across effects strengthens the theoretical coherence of the model. Structural drivers exhibit large effects; moderating and recursive processes operate at smaller but meaningful magnitudes. The R^2 values (Table 10) indicate substantial explanatory power across endogenous constructs, particularly for divergence outcomes.

The findings collectively demonstrate that equality under conditions of permanent uncertainty is not merely strained but structurally reconfigured. Inequality emerges through institutional mediation, adaptive differentiation, and recursive reinforcement, producing stratified social transformation beyond episodic crisis paradigms. The recursive dynamic empirically validates EDF's assertion that inequality and uncertainty are mutually reinforcing rather than sequential phenomena. The feedback loop explains why chronic instability does not self-correct and why divergence persists despite formal equality commitments.

Summary of Results

Figure 2 illustrates the final structural equation model of the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) with standardized path coefficients. The model shows that permanent uncertainty significantly predicts crisis-oriented institutional logics, which in turn predict equality disruption. Equality disruption leads to divergent social outcomes, decreasing adaptive advantage and increasing accumulated disadvantage.

Adaptive capacity moderates these relationships, buffering the negative effects of disruption. Accumulated disadvantages reduce institutional trust, which subsequently reinforces perceptions of permanent uncertainty, confirming the framework's recursive feedback mechanism. Model fit indices indicate excellent fit (CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04), supporting the overall validity of the proposed model.

The standardized structural path figure below presents a final summary of the structural equation model with standardized path coefficients. All reported paths correspond to the hypotheses tested in Research Questions 1–5.

Figure 2. Structural Equation Model of the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF)

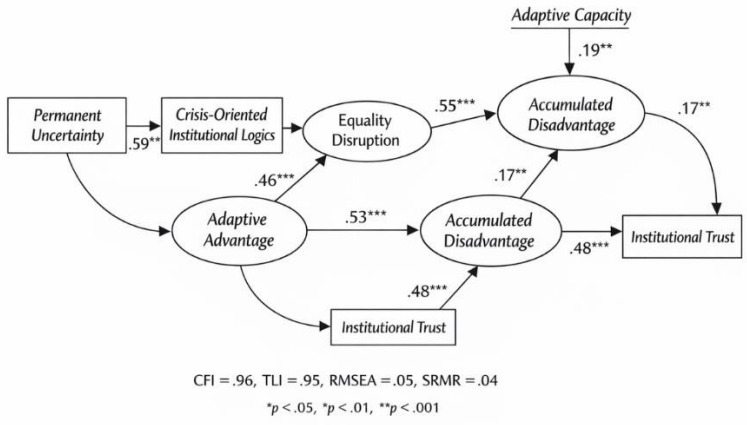

Figure 2. Structural Equation Model of the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF). Standardized coefficients are displayed. Model fit indices: CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04. p < .05, p < .01, p < .001.

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V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) as a theoretically grounded explanation of how equality processes are restructured under conditions of permanent uncertainty. By integrating constructs from crisis governance, inequality, and institutional theory, the EDF moves beyond event-based crisis models to conceptualize uncertainty as a persistent structural condition. The findings provide strong support for the internal logic of the EDF and validate its central theoretical propositions through coherent, theory-consistent empirical patterns.

Validation of Permanent Uncertainty as a Structural Condition

Consistent with scholarship on risk society and chronic instability, the results affirm that permanent uncertainty is not merely a background condition but a primary driver of institutional behavior. The strong association between permanent uncertainty and crisis-oriented institutional logics supports arguments advanced by Beck and others that modern institutions increasingly operate under normalized states of exception rather than episodic disruption. EDF extends this literature by demonstrating that such normalization has predictable downstream consequences for equality mechanisms, thereby validating its core assumption that uncertainty must be theorized as structural rather than contingent.

Institutional Crisis Logics and the Destabilization of Equality

The findings further validate EDF's claim that crisis-oriented institutional logics systematically undermine traditional equality frameworks. Prior work on emergency governance and austerity has noted equity trade-offs under crisis conditions; however, these studies often treat inequality as an outcome rather than a disrupted process. The strong relationship between crisis-oriented institutional logics and equality disruption empirically supports EDF's distinctive contribution: equality itself becomes unstable, conditional, and inconsistently enacted under chronic institutional strain. This validates the EDF's identification of equality disruption as a mediating mechanism rather than a residual effect.

Divergence, Not Uniform Decline: Validating the EDF Outcome Logic

Results related to Research Questions 3a and 3b provide particularly strong validation of EDF's divergence logic. Rather than observing a uniform erosion of outcomes, equality disruption predicted both reduced adaptive advantage and increased accumulated disadvantage, confirming that inequality under permanent uncertainty is best understood as structured divergence. This finding aligns with cumulative disadvantage theory and precarity research but extends them by demonstrating how divergence originates in disrupted equality processes rather than solely in market position or class location. EDF is thus validated as a framework capable of integrating and advancing these literatures.

Adaptive Capacity as a Conditional Mechanism

The moderating role of adaptive capacity offers further theoretical validation. While prior capability-based approaches emphasize agency and resource conversion, they often assume relatively stable institutional contexts. EDF incorporates these insights but situates adaptive capacity within environments of disruption. The buffering effects observed in this study confirm EDF's proposition that adaptive capacity conditions, but does not negate, the effects of equality disruption. This finding supports EDF's claim that resilience and adaptation are unevenly distributed and structurally constrained under permanent uncertainty.

Recursive Reinforcement and the Persistence of Inequality

Perhaps the most theoretically significant contribution of this study is the validation of EDF's recursive mechanism linking accumulated disadvantage, institutional trust, and permanent uncertainty. The observed indirect pathway confirms that inequality is not only produced by uncertainty but actively reinforces it. This finding resonates with institutional trust and legitimacy literatures, which document declining confidence under perceived unfairness, but EDF advances these insights by embedding trust erosion within a self-reinforcing structural loop. In doing so, EDF provides a robust explanation for why inequality and instability persist despite repeated institutional interventions.

Total Effects Findings

The total effects findings provide strong theoretical validation when interpreted alongside existing literature on crisis governance, inequality production, and institutional trust.

The indirect pathway from permanent uncertainty to equality disruption through crisis-oriented institutional logics aligns with risk society theory (Beck), which posits that modern institutions internalize risk management as a governing principle.

However, while risk theory identifies the normalization of uncertainty, EDF extends this insight by empirically demonstrating how crisis governance disrupts equality mechanisms specifically. The mediated total effect (.32) substantiates EDF's argument that institutional adaptation, not uncertainty alone, drives equality instability.

Similarly, the strong total effect of equality disruption on accumulated disadvantage reinforces and extends cumulative disadvantage theory. Standing's precarity framework and related scholarship emphasize insecurity as an outcome of structural change. EDF advances this literature by identifying equality disruption as the upstream mechanism that converts instability into stratified divergence. The magnitude of this effect suggests that equality breakdown, rather than economic position alone, is central to contemporary inequality reproduction.

The recursive pathway linking accumulated disadvantage to permanent uncertainty via institutional trust further triangulates with institutional legitimacy research. Prior studies show that inequality erodes trust; EDF integrates this insight into a structural feedback loop. The significant indirect effect confirms that declining trust reinforces perceptions of instability, thereby legitimizing continued crisis-oriented governance. This empirically validates EDF's distinctive claim that inequality and uncertainty are mutually reinforcing rather than sequential.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that EDF synthesizes and extends crisis theory, capabilities approaches, and structural inequality models by providing a mechanistic, recursive explanation of social transformation under permanent uncertainty. The alignment of effect magnitudes with theoretical expectations strengthens the framework's internal coherence and explanatory power.

Theoretical Implications and Implications for Theory Development

Theoretical Advancement and Distinct Contribution

The present findings establish the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF) as a mechanism-based advancement beyond existing crisis and inequality models. Whereas cumulative disadvantage theory emphasizes the compounding effects of resource disparities, EDF specifies the institutional process through which divergence is generated: the destabilization of equality enactment under normalized crisis governance. Similarly, risk society and crisis governance scholarship describe the proliferation of emergency logics but rarely integrate distributive consequences into a unified structural model. EDF bridges this divide by demonstrating empirically that permanent uncertainty normalizes crisis-oriented institutional logics, which in turn disrupt equality mechanisms and generate stratified trajectories through differential adaptive capacity.

Most distinctively, EDF extends inequality theory by modeling recursive reinforcement dynamics. Rather than conceptualizing inequality as a downstream outcome of instability, the framework demonstrates that accumulated disadvantage feeds back into perceptions of uncertainty through institutional trust erosion. This recursive specification advances theoretical debates by reframing inequality and uncertainty as mutually reinforcing structural processes rather than sequential phenomena. In doing so, EDF shifts the analytic focus from episodic crisis amplification to durable institutional reconfiguration under chronic instability. The implications of this contribution unfold across three interrelated domains: crisis theory, institutional governance scholarship, and inequality research.

Second, the findings extend inequality theory by specifying institutional mediation as a central mechanism in divergence processes. Traditional distributive models frequently conceptualize inequality as the outcome of resource allocation or structural scarcity. By contrast, EDF demonstrates that crisis-oriented institutional logics destabilize equality enactment itself, producing what this study operationalized as equality disruption. The significant pathway from crisis logics to equality disruption substantiates the claim that inequality under chronic instability is structurally produced through altered institutional practices rather than solely through distributive deficits. Equality frameworks may remain formally intact, yet their enactment becomes conditional, inconsistent, and navigation dependent. In this sense, EDF shifts analytic attention from distributive outcomes to institutional processes.

Third, the divergence findings refine cumulative inequality and precarity perspectives. While prior research has documented compounding disadvantage (e.g., Standing; Piketty), the present results identify equality disruption as a proximal institutional mechanism generating divergent trajectories. The stronger effect on accumulated disadvantages than on adaptive advantage suggests that instability intensifies compounding barriers at a greater rate than it erodes advantage. This asymmetry strengthens process-based understandings of stratification by demonstrating that divergence under permanent uncertainty is institutionally mediated rather than merely economically cumulative.

Fourth, the moderating role of adaptive capacity refines structure–agency debates central to capabilities theory (Sen) and cumulative disadvantage research. Rather than treating resilience or adaptability as universally accessible traits, the findings show that adaptive capacity operates within disrupted institutional environments and produces uneven buffering effects. Adaptive capacity attenuates divergence but does not eliminate structural pressures. This bridge is agency-centered and structural accounts by demonstrating that adaptation is conditional and stratified, shaped by institutional logics rather than independent of them.

Finally, the recursive mediation finding offers a novel theoretical contribution that extends legitimacy and precarity scholarship. The empirical support for the pathway linking accumulated disadvantages, institutional trust, and renewed perceptions of permanent uncertainty validates EDF's feedback proposition: stratified outcomes reinforce instability. Inequality does not merely result from chronic uncertainty; it sustains it. As accumulated disadvantage erodes trust, perceptions of instability intensify, legitimizing continued reliance on crisis-oriented governance. This recursive dynamic reconceptualizes equality as a process vulnerable to disruption under chronic strain and positions inequality and uncertainty as mutually reinforcing structural conditions.

Collectively, these findings validate EDF as an integrative theoretical advancement that unifies crisis sociology, institutional governance theory, and inequality research within a coherent explanatory architecture. By specifying how permanent uncertainty normalizes crisis logics, destabilizes equality processes, produces adaptive divergence, and reinforces instability through recursive dynamics, EDF offers a mechanism-based framework for analyzing stratified social transformation in an era defined by enduring uncertainty.

Policy and Institutional Implications

The findings carry significant implications for policymakers and institutional leaders operating under conditions of sustained instability. Most importantly, the strong association between permanent uncertainty and crisis-oriented institutional logics suggests that normalization of emergency governance is not an isolated administrative choice but a structural response to chronic instability. However, the subsequent link between crisis logics and equality disruption demonstrates that such normalization carries distributive consequences. Efficiency-driven, risk-avoidant, and procedural governance strategies, while often defensible in short-term emergencies, may inadvertently destabilize equality processes when institutionalized over time. Policymakers must therefore critically evaluate how crisis responsiveness affects fairness in practice.

Across sectors, the results indicate that crisis governance should be accompanied by deliberate equity safeguards. In healthcare systems, prolonged emergency management may shift priorities toward throughput, risk mitigation, and resource triage at the expense of equitable access and continuity of care. In education, sustained crisis protocols can alter admissions practices, instructional delivery, and resource allocation in ways that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. In labor markets, extended reliance on temporary protections, flexible regulation, or contingent employment arrangements may institutionalize precarity rather than reduce it. These sector-specific examples illustrate a broader structural dynamic: crisis logics reshape equality enactment even when formal commitments remain intact.

The identification of equality disruption as a mediating mechanism underscores that equity policy cannot rely solely on formal inclusion or distributive fairness. Under chronic instability, rules may remain unchanged while their implementation becomes conditional, inconsistent, and navigation dependent. Institutional leaders should therefore prioritize reducing procedural opacity, minimizing bureaucratic navigation burdens, and safeguarding consistent access pathways—particularly for populations with lower adaptive capacity. Embedding equity impact monitoring within emergency protocols can help ensure that short-term responses do not produce long-term structural divergence.

The moderation findings further highlight adaptive capacity as a practical leverage point. Although structural drivers remain primary, strengthening institutional literacy, expanding access to information, simplifying administrative processes, and increasing resource accessibility can attenuate divergence effects. Interventions that enhance individuals' ability to navigate complex systems may mitigate accumulated disadvantages without assuming institutional stability. However, such efforts must complement, not substitute for, structural reforms that stabilize equality processes.

Finally, the recursive trust findings reveal that inequality carries long-term governance costs. As accumulated disadvantage erodes institutional trust, perceptions of instability intensify, reinforcing reliance on crisis-oriented governance and perpetuating the cycle of uncertainty. Breaking this feedback loop requires deliberate efforts to restore institutional

legitimacy through transparency, procedural consistency, and demonstrable fairness. Policy reform must therefore integrate crisis responsiveness with structural equity preservation if institutional legitimacy is to be sustained over time.

In sum, the results suggest that policy responses to permanent uncertainty must move beyond short-term stabilization toward institutional designs that actively protect equality processes under instability. Sustaining equity in an era of chronic uncertainty requires aligning crisis governance with structural safeguards that prevent divergence from becoming entrenched.

Methodological Implications

Beyond its substantive contributions, this study carries methodological implications for research on inequality and institutional dynamics under conditions of chronic instability. First, the operationalization of permanent uncertainty, crisis-oriented institutional logics, and equality disruption demonstrates that structurally abstract constructs can be translated into measurable variables suitable for multivariate modeling. This expands the empirical toolkit available to scholars examining inequality beyond traditional socioeconomic indicators.

Second, the use of an integrated structural equation model combining direct effects, moderation, and recursive mediation illustrates the value of mechanism-based modeling in inequality research. Rather than treating inequality as a static outcome, the present design captures institutional mediation, adaptive differentiation, and feedback dynamics within a single analytic framework. This approach advances methodological practice by aligning statistical modeling with theoretical process.

Third, the findings highlight the importance of modeling recursive relationships when studying instability and stratification. Conventional regression approaches often assume linear, unidirectional causality. By empirically testing feedback pathways linking accumulated disadvantages, institutional trust, and renewed perceptions of uncertainty, this study demonstrates the feasibility and importance of incorporating dynamic structural reinforcement into quantitative inequality research.

Together, these methodological contributions suggest that future studies of inequality under chronic instability should prioritize mechanism specification, institutional mediation, and recursive modeling to better capture the complexity of contemporary social transformation.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the empirical findings provide initial support for the Equality Disruption Framework (EDF), several limitations warrant careful consideration and frame directions for future research.

First, the cross-sectional design precludes strong causal and recursive inference. While the structural model is theory-driven and internally coherent, the temporal ordering of constructs cannot be definitively established. In particular, the recursive pathway linking accumulated disadvantage, institutional trust, and renewed perceptions of permanent uncertainty was modeled theoretically rather than longitudinally verified. Future studies should employ panel or longitudinal designs to examine how these constructs evolve over time and to test whether recursive reinforcement operates dynamically under sustained instability.

Second, all constructs were measured through self-reported perceptions, introducing potential common method variance and perceptual distortion. Although confirmatory factor analysis supported discriminant validity and model fit indices indicated strong structural coherence, reliance on a single data source may inflate associations. Future research should incorporate multi-source data, behavioral indicators, administrative records, or institutional-level metrics to triangulate findings and strengthen structural validation.

Third, the absence of objective institutional indicators limits the ability to directly validate crisis-oriented institutional logics and equality disruption at the organizational or systemic level. While perceptions are theoretically meaningful, particularly for constructs such as trust and perceived fairness—the inclusion of policy data, governance indicators, or institutional performance measures would enhance empirical robustness and extend EDF's explanatory scope.

Fourth, although the sample size (N = 180) was adequately powered for structural modeling, contextual specificity constrains generalizability. Permanent uncertainty and institutional crisis logics likely operate differently across sectors, welfare regimes, governance systems, and cultural contexts. Comparative, cross-sectoral, and cross-national research would help refine EDF's boundary conditions and assess its applicability across institutional environments characterized by varying degrees of stability and social protection.

Fifth, adaptive capacity was modeled at the individual level. While this aligns with the framework's structure–agency integration, future research could extend the model by incorporating collective, community-level, or institutional adaptive capacity. Such multi-level modeling would allow examination of how macro-level adaptive infrastructures interact with individual navigation ability under chronic instability.

Finally, although the model demonstrated substantial explanatory power, unexplained variance remains across endogenous constructs. Additional mediating and moderating mechanisms, such as social capital networks, political participation, digital access, or organizational transparency, may further clarify divergence processes and strengthen theoretical precision.

Collectively, the present findings should be interpreted as provisional empirical validation of the Equality Disruption Framework. Replication using longitudinal designs, objective institutional indicators, and cross-contextual samples is necessary to more fully establish EDF's causal structure and generalizability. Such extensions will allow scholars to more rigorously evaluate the framework's capacity to explain stratified social transformation in an era defined by permanent uncertainty.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study validates the Equality Disruption Framework as an integrative explanation of how equality is restructured under permanent uncertainty. Results show that chronic instability normalizes crisis-oriented governance, disrupts equality processes, generates divergent outcomes, and feeds back through trust erosion to sustain uncertainty. By moving beyond crisis-as-event assumptions, EDF explains why inequality persists, and often deepens, amid ongoing instability. The framework offers a strong foundation for future empirical testing and policy-relevant inquiry in the age of permanent uncertainty.

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