

Neoliberal Ideology and Socio-Ecological Crisis – Exemplary Results from an Emerging Research Program in Applied Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberal financial capitalism has attained hegemony with regard to political-economic practices, but also psycho-social processes and belief systems. This article reports preliminary results from an emerging research program on internalized neoliberal ideological beliefs in the context of socio-ecological crisis¹. Introductory remarks on the epistemological position of the focal research group are followed by theorizing and method development on neoliberal ideological beliefs. Subsequently, three studies, two quantitative and one qualitative, on the psychological significance of neoliberal ideology in the socio-ecological polycrisis are reported, addressing issues of climate, migration, and democracy. Study 1 examines system justification, ideological beliefs, environmental consciousness, climate-protective behavior, and self-estimated carbon footprint. Study 2 focuses on neoliberal ideology, moral disengagement, and civic activism for refugees. Based on interviews, study 3 elaborates psychological functions of neoliberal ideologies among the economically disadvantaged. Implications regarding the psychological impact of political economy in preventing societal transformations are discussed with reference to self-reinforcing hegemony, socially corrosive false consciousness, and neoliberalism's xenophobic and authoritarian turn.

Keywords

Neoliberal Ideological Beliefs – System Justification – Moral Disengagement – Climate-protective Behavior – Civic Engagement – Migration – Polycrisis

„Wedded to the belief that the market should be the organizing principle for all political, social, and economic decisions, neoliberalism wages an incessant attack on democracy, public goods, and non-commodified values. Under neoliberalism everything either is for sale or is plundered for profit“ (Giroux, 2005, p. 2)

Preface: Epistemological Positioning

Psychological research on neoliberal ideology at the University of Innsbruck was inspired by a pioneering paper in the *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* and the ensuing academic controversy. Bal and Dóci (2018) offered a provocative, insightful analysis of

how *political*, *social*, and *fantasmatic* logics of neoliberalism permeate organizations and workplace practices as well as the academic discipline of work and organizational psychology. Scholars challenging this critical assessment to defend the status quo have decried a lack of empirical evidence on the corrosive role of neoliberal ideology. Founded in 2018 as part of the international network for the *Future of Work and Organizational Psychology* (FoWOP), the *Innsbruck Group on Critical Research in Work and Organizational Psychology* (I-CROP) set out to theoretically and empirically advance this perspective. The group developed a scale on internalized neoliberal ideological beliefs and pursued the conceptual elaboration, application, and dissemination of Bal and Dóci's (2018) model to evaluate societal, organizational, and individual

¹ This summary article is based on the first author's inaugural lecture at the University of Innsbruck on December 12, 2024. Previous versions were presented at a small group meeting on "Work and Organizational Psychology in the Era of Grand Challenges: Integrating Theories and Practices for Addressing Social Inequalities and Environmental Sustainability", held on July 8-10, 2024, in Milan, and at the joint Congress of the German and Austrian Psychological Societies, held on September 16-19, 2024, in Vienna. Reported results are unpublished, preliminary, and subject to further analysis. Acknowledgements are due to all students contributing to data collection, specifically Noah Schramm, Peter Hansel, and Elisabeth Halter, whose Master's thesis research projects, supervised by the first author, are included here, and to Maximilian Aschenbrenner, who assisted with data curation.

dynamics from the perspective of the humanist critique of economistic ideology (Höge & Hornung, 2024; Hornung et al., 2021; Hornung & Höge, 2019a; 2019b; Unterrainer et al., 2024; Weber et al., 2020). Aside from its involvement in organizing workshops, small group meetings, and virtual speaker events, an important milestone in strengthening the group's position within an emerging movement was the first *International Conference on Critical and Radical Humanist Work and Organizational Psychology*, held from 11th to 13th of July 2022 at the University of Innsbruck and documented in a special issue of this journal (Hornung et al., 2023). In 2024, a new designation of the focal professorship of applied psychology to focus on social-ecological responsibility and sustainability in work, economy, and society, has broadened the scope to include perspectives of social and political psychology.

The mission of I-CROP has been described as the promotion of critical reflections on the role of the economic and societal conditions for psychological aspects in the domains of work, research, and beyond (Weber et al., 2020). Uncritical approaches, that neglect or downplay the psychological impact of the political economy, are seen as inherently ideological, serving the particular interests that benefit from unquestioned power relations. Accordingly, value-free approaches to applied psychology are implausible. Instead, researchers need to disclose the values and interests guiding their endeavors. The underlying understanding of *critical science* and *ideology critique* follows the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (e.g., Adorno, Horkheimer, Fromm, Marcuse, Habermas), espousing radical humanist ethics (Dashtipour et al., 2024). Research of the group aims to foster prosociality and solidarity, personality development, psychosocial well-being and health, democracy, equality, ethics, and social justice. It seeks to promote humanistic values and emancipation to counter limiting, oppressive, and exploitative influences inherent in the hegemonic structures, practices, and ideologies of neoliberal capitalism. Enacting these values and goals guides the group's research, collaborating as a collective within non-hierarchical international network structures.

Elaborating characteristics and aspirations of critical research in applied psychology seems warranted. These converge with the positioning of critical work and organizational psychology, outlined by Islam and Sanderson (2022) and Weber (2023), but feature a broader scope and slightly different connotations. These can be summarized as being socio-critical, dialectical, deconstructing, self-reflexive, emancipatory, and humanist. Specifically: a) *socio-critical* implies explicit references to critical social theory and critical psychologies, albeit with a pluralistic and undogmatic orientation, including sociological (unorthodox) Marxism, Frankfurt School Critical Theory, analytical social psychology, critical psychology as a subject science, feminist and postcolonial theory, critical race theory as well as critical theories of socio-ecological

transformation (critical sustainabilities, degrowth, ecosocialism); b) *dialectical* means addressing historically determined conflicts of interest and power imbalances in labor relations, economy, and society, examining their effects on social and ecological problems (e.g., socio-economic inequality, shifting of social and environmental costs to underprivileged groups); c) *deconstructing* refers to an ideology-critical perspective transcending superficial explanations (e.g., social responsibility and sustainability as business models, convergence of interests in employment); d) *self-reflexive* means problematizing how scientific theories, methods, and results are influenced by epistemological positioning, economic interests, and power structures (e.g., individualistic, managerial, ethnocentric, patriarchal perspectives); e) *emancipatory* intention challenges the primacy of economic goals (e.g., performance, efficiency, growth) and prioritizes alternative socio-ecological objectives (e.g., health, personal development, social justice, democracy, environmental protection – as values in themselves); f) *humanist* focus emphasizes human dignity and development, reconfirming inherent value of human and non-human life, including the natural environment. These criteria overlap with principles of non-performativity, denaturalization, and reflexivity, advocated by critical management studies.

The umbrella of above characteristics accommodates a range of topics, including alternative, democratic organizations (Unterrainer et al., 2022) and multi-level perspectives on necessary socio-ecological transformations (Hornung et al., 2022). The focus of this article is on neoliberal ideology, a core interest and emerging research program of I-CROP (Unterrainer et al., 2024). This scholarly activity has culminated in a symposium on psychological implications of internalized neoliberal ideologies in the context of social-economic crises at the joint congress of the German and Austrian psychological societies (Hornung & Weber, 2024). The article draws on the presented materials as well as their elaboration for the first author's inaugural lecture at the University of Innsbruck. After preliminary theorizing and summarized method development, three exemplary studies on the role of neoliberal ideology in current crises involving climate, migration, and democracy, are outlined and implications for societal transformation discussed.

Preliminary Theorizing on Neoliberal Ideology

Neoliberalism as a political-economic theory was developed by the elitist, anti-collectivist Mont Pèlerin Society in postwar Europe, dominated by economists Friedrich August von Hayek and Milton Friedman (Höge & Hornung, 2024). The first neoliberal experiment was conducted in Chile under a fascist military dictatorship (1973-1990) in collusion with the Chicago school of economics. In the 1980s, neoliberalism became the

basis for radical policies of Thatcherism and Reaganism and was imposed with devastating effects by World Bank and International Monetary Fund as structural reforms on the Global South (Consensus of Washington). Today, neoliberalism has evolved into the unquestioned (hegemonic) ideology of global financial capitalism, penetrating all areas of life (Plehwe et al., 2007). On the level of political-economic practices, it demands expansion and deregulation of markets, entrepreneurial and corporate „freedoms“; unconstrained international finance and trade, low taxes for capital, privatization of state-owned assets, demolition of social welfare systems, dumping of labor and environmental laws, etc. On the psychological level, it enforces subjectivity based on the normative model of the self-interested, utility-maximizing *homo oeconomicus*, investing in its *human capital* and constructing its identity like a competitive enterprise – a mode of internalized control or *neoliberal governmentality* (Foster, 2017; Hornung et al., 2022). Following Bal and Dóci (2018), neoliberal ideology shapes societal institutions, work organizations, and mindsets of individuals via political, social, and fantasmatic logics, pervading employment and management practices, but also their representation in academia.

A model of the dynamic interplay of self-selection and socialization effects of political ideologies was provided by Jost et al. (2009). Accordingly, ideologies are constructed and disseminated top-down by elites as a discourse superstructure. Exposed societal members acquire the respective political attitudes, partly depending on psychodynamic bottom-up processes, based on their motivational substructure. The latter refers to (unfulfilled) needs and motives that influence their receptiveness to specific ideological positions. The construct of *elective affinities* (Jost et al., 2009) describes the mutual attraction between the structure and contents of ideological belief systems and the motivational dispositions of their adherents. The psychological basis of ideological beliefs is found in the configuration of relational, epistemic, existential, and system justification motives (Hennes et al., 2012; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). *Relational motives* refer to the need for social connection, group-based identification, and shared reality. *Epistemic motives* describe a cognitive preference for structure, order, and closure, and low tolerance for ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty. *Existential motives* underlie the drive to manage threats and maintain a sense of security, self-esteem, and meaning. Partly a result of the former (Hennes et al., 2012), *system justification* refers to the motivated tendency to rationalize and defend the status quo and to perceive the existing social order as overall fair, legitimate, and desirable.

Indeed, a prolific line of research on *system justification theory* (Jost, 2019) has shown that people have a strong motivation to justify and legitimize the current social, economic, and political arrangements. Examples of system-justifying ideologies include the Protestant work ethic, meritocratic ideology, fair market ideology, belief in

a just world, power distance, social dominance orientation, opposition to equality, right-wing authoritarianism, and political conservatism (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Research has shown that both socially advantaged and disadvantaged groups internalize ideologies of system justification, resulting in low support for social change and redistribution of resources as well as diminished negative affect (e.g., outrage over injustice). For disadvantaged groups, this palliative function of system justification comes at the cost of reduced in-group favoritism (perceived inferiority), lower self-esteem, and higher evaluation (idealization) of socially dominating groups (Jost, 2019). An extensively researched system-justifying ideology, social dominance orientation is the belief that some groups in society are superior to others and that group-based hierarchy and inequality is necessary or even desirable (Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018). System justification theory is based on a critical concept of ideology as a dominant set of ideas, practices, and discourses serving interests of powerful political-economic elites, constructed and disseminated *top-down* in society and adopted *bottom-up* by people based on unfulfilled psychological needs and vulnerabilities. Neoliberal ideology is a type of system justification, referring to affirmative beliefs regarding political-economic ideas, practices, and discourses related to market-based logics, justifying social and economic inequality. Thus, research on neoliberal ideology can draw on the extensive corpus of empirical evidence on system justification, however, not without establishing its generalizability and specific aspects of neoliberal beliefs.

Development of the Neoliberal Ideological Beliefs Questionnaire

To advance empirical research, the *neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire* (Unterrainer et al., 2024) was developed. Underlying is a critical concept of ideology as a hegemonic system of meanings and practices, reflecting political-economic interests of privileged societal groups. Neoliberal ideological beliefs refer to individual internalizations of societally disseminated ideological discourses and practices. Based on Bal and Dóci (2018), the instrument operationalized the political logic of neoliberalism in three dimensions: a) *individualism*, emphasizing responsibility, self-reliance, and self-interest of the individual; b) *competition*, in terms of the necessity to dominate and outperform others to be successful; c) *instrumentality*, postulating economic utility as a criterion for human worth. The three dimensions were conceptually elaborated (Unterrainer et al., 2024) with regard to incorporated affirmations (efficiency and effectiveness), naturalization (reference to human nature), and negation (derogation of alternatives). The instrument was empirically developed in several steps in four (aggregated) samples of students and employed persons in Austria and Germany, gathered in Master's thesis research projects, overall comprising

more than four thousand cases. Initially, a pool of 51 items (6-point agreement scale) was tested, which were eventually condensed to 18 items (6 items per dimension), using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. In the last step, a 9-item short version was established. The convergent validity of the scale was tested with a battery of constructs. Confirmed were positive associations with unethical, socially corrosive or system-stabilizing constructs, such as the dark triad of personality (narcissism, Machiavellism, psychopathy), group-based enmity (e.g., racism, sexism), social dominance orientation, self-interest orientation, counterproductive work behavior, economic system justification, ideology of market competition, and ideology of shareholder value. Negative correlations were found with ethical, prosocial, and transformative aspects, such as political engagement, interpersonal trust, moral behavior, prosocial work behavior, and environmental attitudes. Further, incremental validity of the instrument in explaining additional variance over the *neoliberal beliefs inventory* by Bay-Cheng et al. (2015), with the dimensions of system inequality, competition, personal wherewithal, and government interference, was established. A conceptual differentiation was provided with regard to the newer *neoliberal orientation questionnaire* by Girerd et al. (2023), which consists of the four dimensions of competitiveness, individual self-regulation, relational detachment, and public divestment. Distinct features of the focal instrument are its theoretical foundation based on Bal and Dóci (2018) and its focus on work and employment, whereas the other instruments combine personal lifestyle and societal or policy aspects.

For a preliminary assessment of the political structure of neoliberal ideological beliefs, the aggregated scale score correlated with party preferences in a subsample of more than 2000 persons. Participants rated the extent, to which main political parties in Austria and Germany corresponded to their own political views (10-point scale). In both countries, adherence to neoliberal ideology was associated positively with endorsement of conservative, liberal, and right-wing parties and negatively to support for the ecological green party, social democrats, and democratic socialists. In a smaller subsample, *social dominance orientation* (Ho et al., 2015) showed a similar correlational pattern with party preferences as neoliberal ideological beliefs and the two constructs shared about a quarter of variance. Neoliberal ideological beliefs also shared about a quarter of variance with political left-right self-placement (10-point scale; Dippel et al., 2022), indicating a tendency towards conservative, authoritarian, and elitist views. These results support the *convergence thesis* of neoliberal capitalism and right-wing authoritarianism (Biebricher, 2020; Pühlinger & Ötsch, 2018). Their common ground is an ideological preference for inequality and narratives of superiority and inferiority as established by previous research in social and political psychology (Azevedo et al., 2019; Beattie, 2019; Goudarzi et al., 2022). Less well

examined is the psychology of neoliberal ideology in socio-ecological crisis.

Exemplary Studies on Neoliberal Ideology and Socio-Ecological Crisis

The unfolding *planetary socio-ecological multi-, omni- or polycrisis* resembles a compounding of ecological, economic, social, and political crises. Accelerating environmental catastrophes are worsened by instability and injustice of economic and political systems, resulting in resource wars, poverty, forced migration, societal polarization, and rise of right-wing populist movements (Albert, 2024; Brand, 2016; Boukalas, 2023). Context and common denominator of these crises is the global political economy of financial capitalism and hegemony of neoliberal ideology, the socially and psychologically corrosive effects of which are increasingly subject to research (Beattie, 2019). The socio-ecological transformation of societies requires understanding and challenging the contribution of neoliberal ideology to multiple crises (Bell, 2021; Worth, 2018). The focus on internalized ideological beliefs, as indoctrination based on distorted meaning in service of power, provides a dialectic perspective to overcome individualism in psychology. This dialectic is inherent in the conception of system-justifying ideologies as constructed and disseminated top-down by political-economic elites and adopted bottom-up by individuals, based on psychological vulnerabilities due to epistemic, existential, and relational needs.

Studies compiled in this article investigate the role of neoliberal ideology with regard to three current interrelated socio-ecological challenges: a) the *climate crisis* of global warming and associated environmental disasters, caused by continuously increasing greenhouse gas emissions; b) the *refugee crisis* of accelerating migration triggered by climate change, poverty, and wars, coupled with an increasingly hostile reception in many host countries; c) the *crisis of democracy* associated with the rise of right-wing populism rallying against migrants and measures to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions in many economically developed countries. Addressing the climate crisis, study 1 presents survey research on system justification, neoliberal ideology, and individual climate-protection. Controlling for environmental attitudes, neoliberal ideological beliefs mediated the negative relationship between system justification and climate-protective behavior, which, together with income, predicted the personal carbon footprint. Situated in the context of the refugee crisis and eroding solidarity, study 2 investigates relationships among neoliberal ideology, moral disengagement, and social activism for refugees. Moral disengagement from the treatment of asylum seekers mediated a negative association between neoliberal ideological beliefs and civic engagement for protecting the human rights of people

seeking refuge. Problematizing the crisis of democracy and right-wing populism, study 3 present qualitative research on internalization of neoliberal ideology among socio-economically disadvantaged persons. Individuals in precarious life situations and long-term unemployment voiced explicit or implicit support for neoliberal ideologies, the internalization of which appeared to serve psychological functions of reducing cognitive dissonance and appeasing epistemic and existential motives, particularly in conjunction with xenophobic and crypto-fascist themes.

Study 1: System Justification, Neoliberal Ideology, and Individual Climate-Protection

The first study examined the role of system justification and the political-economic ideology of neoliberalism in influencing climate-protective behavior and resulting impact on the personal carbon footprint among a segment of the general population in Austria and Germany. The context of the study is the escalating climate crisis, caused by anthropogenic global warming. (Davidson & Kemp, 2024; Gunderson, 2023). Greenhouse gas emissions in Germany and Austria average more than ten tons per person per year. The estimated carbon budget to limit global warming is less than twenty percent of that value (Newell et al., 2021). While individual behavior change can have an impact on the personal carbon footprint, political-economic ideologies in contemporary consumer and market societies may undermine efforts directed at ecological sustainability (Jylha & Akrami, 2015; Heath & Gifford, 2006). A core assumption of the study is that the adoption of neoliberal ideology is partly rooted in a need to justify the prevailing ecologically unsustainable political-economic system. This 'normative power of the factual' has been investigated in research on system-justification theory (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Fair market ideology, social dominance orientation, belief in a just world, and meritocracy are exemplary system-justifying ideologies. Emphasizing the primacy of the economic interests and unconstrained entrepreneurial freedom, it was hypothesized that neoliberal ideology negatively predicts climate-protective behavior. This negative normative societal influence is assumed to run contrary to positive intentions associated with individual environmental consciousness. Accordingly, contradictory effects of neoliberal ideological beliefs and aspects of environmental consciousness on climate protective behavior were postulated and tested. Reflecting the potential environmental impact of individual actions, climate-protective behavior was expected to relate negatively to the estimated size of the personal carbon footprint.

Study 1 Methods

In the context of Master's thesis research projects, an online questionnaire was distributed via the university's student mailing list, personal networks, and a survey exchange platform. It yielded a sample of $N = 344$ persons residing in Austria or Germany; roughly two thirds were women; mean age was below 30 years; the majority was unmarried, had no children, and almost two-thirds held university degrees. More than half were enrolled in university but also held part-time jobs, followed by students without side jobs, employees in for-profit and non-profit organizations, and persons between jobs. Monthly net income was measured with eight categories. The majority reported less than 1500 Euro after taxes, but the sample also included higher incomes. Average self-assessment of subjective social status was about one point above scale midpoint on a 10-point scale.

System justification was measured with the *general system justification scale* (Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007). Sample items are: „In general, I find society to be fair“; „Most policies serve the greater good“ (9-point agreement scale). The *neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire* (Unterrainer et al., 2024) was used in a preliminary version with 22 items (6-point scale), allocated to the dimensions of *individualism* (7 items; e.g., „Anyone who is not successful in their career, should blame themselves, not others“), *competition* (8 items; e.g., „Without competition, there would be no incentive to develop better products and services“), and *instrumentality* (7 items; e.g., „Employers should view employees first and foremost as a means to an end“). *Environmental attitudes* were measured with items from the revised *environmental attitudes inventory* (Sutton & Gyuris, 2015). Altogether 15 items (7-point scale) from six of the instrument's 12 subscales were included: interventionist policies, environmental fragility, eco-centric concern and reverse scores of anthropocentric conservation, confidence in science, and utilization of nature. Sample items: „Protecting the environment is more important than protecting economic growth“; „If things continue on their present course, we will soon experience a major ecological catastrophe“. *Environmental knowledge* was assessed with eight (out of 36) questions (e.g., carbon emissions, energy efficiency) from the *test of environmental knowledge* by Geiger et al. (2019). On average, participants answered five questions correctly. *Connection with nature* used a 5-item subscale of the *sources of meaning in life questionnaire* (Schnell, 2009). A sample items is: „My goal is to live in harmony with nature“ (6-point scale).

The instrument to assess *climate-protective behavior* was developed by adapting items (6-point scale) from several existing measures (Bogner, 2018; Kaiser, 1998; La Trobe & Acott, 2000; Markle, 2013). After preliminary scale analyses, 20 items were retained, distinctively loading on five dimensions: a) *housing and energy* (7 items; e.g., „I heat as little as possible in winter“); b) *mobility* (3 items;

e.g., „I hardly ever drive a car“); c) *consumption* (4 items; e.g., „I hardly spend any money on shopping“); d) *nutrition* (2 items; e.g., „I do not eat meat“); e) *activism* (4 items; e.g., „Combating the climate crisis is an important criterion for me in political elections“). Personal *carbon footprint* was calculated based on a model by the German Federal Environment Agency with 14 questions on housing, electricity, mobility, food choices, and consumption, focusing on objective and quantifiable factors (e.g., size of housing in square meters; car ownership; amount spent on consumption; hours spent on a plane). Participants received feedback on their carbon emissions and national averages for each dimension, including reduction strategies. The estimated average was below the mean for Austria and Germany.

Study 1 Results

Hierarchical regression models were calculated for each dependent variable (neoliberal ideological beliefs, climate-protective behavior, estimated carbon footprint). First, control variables (age, gender, education, income, subjective social status) and, subsequently, respective predictor variables were included (system justification, environmental attitudes, environmental knowledge, connection with nature, neoliberal ideological beliefs, climate-protective behavior). To test for mediation, neoliberal ideological beliefs and climate-protective behavior were entered in separate steps to observe changes in effects of system justification, respectively neoliberal ideological beliefs. Secondly, indirect effects were assessed with the process procedure for bootstrap confidence intervals. Lastly, hypothesized and exploratory relationships were integrated in a structural path model. Findings in these analyses strongly converged. Results confirmed a serial chain of mediation effects, whereby system justification related positively to neoliberal ideology, which related negatively to climate-protective behavior, which, in turn, related negatively to the estimated carbon footprint. This chain of associations was stable with regard to influences of control variables and aspects ecological consciousness, which were explored on all four constructs in the path model. All three constructs of ecological consciousness were positively associated with climate-protective behavior. Environmental attitudes also had negative direct effects on neoliberal ideological beliefs and estimated carbon footprint. Connection with nature had an unexpected positive association with estimated personal carbon emissions, likely due to environmental impacts of nature-based recreational activities (e.g., travelling). Reflecting socio-economic data, income level was a substantial predictor of carbon emissions. With the exception of a tendency among men to score higher in neoliberal ideological beliefs, no demographic influences were found.

Study 1 Discussion

Examined were contradictory ideological and individual antecedents of climate-protective behavior and its impact on the personal carbon footprint. Partly a manifestation of system justification, the economic ideology of neoliberalism related negatively, aspects of individual ecological consciousness positively to behavior effective in reducing one's detrimental environmental impact (Sutton & Gyuris, 2015). Independent of personal efforts to reduce personal greenhouse gas emissions, disposable income and the associated lifestyle determine the (consumption-based) carbon footprint to a substantial extent (e.g., size of housing, car ownership, frequent flights). This exemplifies that wealthy individuals and regions contribute disproportionality to climate change (Newell et al., 2021). Paradoxically, under these circumstances, felt connection with nature may contribute to the ecological load. Although the study is illustrative, its generalizability is debatable due to the non-representative convenience sample (with disproportionate numbers of women and university graduates). Self-report measures raise methodological issues, ranging from inaccurate and socially desirable responding to common method variance. Nonetheless, this study supports the conclusion that market-based consumer societies subject individuals to contradictory messages regarding climate-protective behavior (Jylhan & Akrami, 2015). System-justifying ideologies normalizing individualism, competition, and instrumentality disseminated at the societal level, can undermine intentions of environmental consciousness at the individual level, particularly when combined with higher financial means. The necessary socio-ecological transformation towards sustainable subsistence and the individualistic, competitive, and instrumental consumer society of neoliberal capitalism appear incompatible – not only on the material level of an extractivist economy, but also on the psychological level of ideological preformation and environmentally unsustainable behavior.

Study 2: Neoliberal Ideology, Moral Disengagement, and Civic Engagement for Refugees

The second study examined the role of the political-economic ideology of neoliberalism in social-cognitive processes of moral disengagement from the often cruel and disparaging treatment of people seeking refuge – and the associated erosion of civic engagement for human rights of displaced persons in Austria and Germany. Background of the study is the so-called *refugee crisis* in Europe, involving growing numbers of people fleeing from human rights violations, climate disasters, and poverty in their home countries in the Global South (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). Resulting social tensions and rising hostility towards migrants and displaced people are instigated and exploited

by right-wing populist parties, contributing to a crisis of civil society and democracy (Bandau, 2023; Van der Brug & Harteveld, 2021). The central construct here, *moral disengagement*, is based on the work of Bandura (2002) and captures the socio-cognitive mechanisms people use to decouple their internal moral standards from their actions, thus, facilitating unethical conduct without feeling distress (Moore, 2015). These mechanisms are observable in media reports on current geopolitical conflicts and include *moral justification* (e.g., attack as self-defense), euphemistic labeling (e.g., eliminating targets), *advantageous comparison* (e.g., less bad than conceivable), *disregard or distortion of consequences* (e.g., justifying civilian casualties), *displacement of responsibility* (e.g., not one's fault), *diffusion of responsibility* (e.g., others need to act), *attribution of blame* (e.g., brought it on themselves), and *dehumanization* (e.g., evil terrorists; the enemy). There seems to exist both a generalized (dispositional) tendency to morally disengage as well as situational disengagement in certain domains or on specific issues (Newman et al., 2020), as investigated previously with regard to the treatment of migrants and refugees (Greenhalgh et al., 2015). A core assumption was that the individualistic, competitive, and instrumental logic of neoliberal capitalism would feed into the collective moral disengagement from the suffering of asylum seekers, providing a basis to rationalize the status quo (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). Moral disengagement from the treatment of people seeking refuge, in turn, was hypothesized to erode civic engagement on their behalf.

Study 2 Methods

Data were gathered for the purpose of Master's thesis research project, through an online survey, distributed via the university's student mailing list, social media channels, and personal contacts. Obtained was a convenience sample of $N = 276$ Austrian and German participants. The gender ratio was balanced; mean age was slightly below 30 years; the majority was unmarried, had no children, and about half reported a university education. Roughly two-fifths were employed with an open-ended contract and one-fifth with a temporary contract. About one-fifth was studying full-time without a side job. A smaller number was self-employed, employed by a work agency, or did not respond to this question. About two-fifth worked in for-profit businesses, one-fifth in non-profit organizations, roughly one-fifth had a supervisory or managerial role. Monthly net income was assessed with four categories. More than two-fifth reported to earn 1500 Euros or less per month, about a quarter up to 3000 Euros, and one-tenth more than 4500 Euros. Almost one-fifth did not answer this question. Subjective social status included five categories. More than half identified as middle class; about a quarter as upper-middle or upper class, and less than one-fifth as lower-middle or lower class.

Internalized *neoliberal ideological beliefs* were measured with a preliminary 24-item scale version, in which individualism, competition, and instrumentality were each measured with eight items. *Moral disengagement from the treatment of people seeking refuge* was assessed with a 16-item instrument (6-point agreement scale) initially developed in Australia (Greenhalgh et al., 2015) and extensively revised for the present context. Sample items are: „Forcing refugees back across the border („push-backs“) is justified to ensure Europe's security“; „If refugees die during risky border-crossing attempts in the Mediterranean Sea, Europe bears no responsibility“; „It is okay to treat asylum seekers harshly if they do not obey the law“. *Civic engagement for people seeking refuge* used an adaptation of the 9-item checklist of feminist activism (Stake et al., 1994). Items captured activities to support the cause of refugees, such as a) keeping informed; b) positively influencing others; c) signing petitions; d) circulating petitions; e) attending protests; f) writing letters to politicians or media; g) donating money; h) working for a political campaign or relief operation; i) other supportive actions. Based on a dichotomous (yes/no) response format, a sum score was calculated. On average, participants reported three of the above activities.

Study 2 Results

Hierarchical linear regression assumed civic engagement for refugees as the dependent variable. Gender, age, education, income, and social status acted as controls. In this step, education and age showed weak positive effects. Next, neoliberal ideological beliefs were included, displaying a substantial negative association with civic engagement for refugees. This relationship, however, ceased to be statistically meaningful once moral disengagement was entered as a mediator with an even stronger significant negative effect. Lastly, a multiplicative interaction term of neoliberal ideology and moral disengagement was added, yielding a significant positive moderator effect. The initial influence of education vanished, whereas a small positive effect of age on civic engagement persisted. Both mediator and moderator effects were probed further. Mediation was tested using bootstrapping, confirming a significant negative indirect effect of neoliberal ideological beliefs on civic engagement, fully mediated by moral disengagement. Moderation was examined in an interaction plot, suggesting a compensatory interplay of neoliberal ideological beliefs and moral disengagement with regard to civic engagement for refugees. When moral disengagement was high, civic engagement was low and internalization of neoliberal ideology was irrelevant. When moral disengagement was low, high neoliberal ideology eroded active solidarity with refugees.

Study 2 Discussion

In this study, moral disengagement from inhumane treatment of people seeking refuge mediated a negative relationship between internalized neoliberal ideological beliefs and civic engagement for the human rights of migrants. Accordingly, neoliberal ideology facilitates moral decoupling, which reduces civic engagement (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). An additional compensatory relationship of neoliberal ideology and moral disengagement suggests internalized neoliberal ideological beliefs erode active solidarity with refugees, particularly among persons with a lower tendency towards moral justification (Faulkner & Bliuc, 2016). This complex interplay suggest that neoliberal ideology may act as both antecedent and alternative mechanism for the rationalization of injustice. Limitations are connected to the non-representative convenience sample and reliance on self-report data. The latter raises issues ranging from social desirability to common method bias and prevents a sophisticated analysis of the temporal dynamics of neoliberal ideology and moral distancing. To conclude, rather than providing a democratic bulwark against xenophobic incivility, the individualistic, competitive, and instrumental logic of neoliberal capitalism reinforces collective moral disengagement from the suffering of asylum seekers. Emphasizing complete self-reliance, rivalry for resources, and humans as means for economic ends, neoliberal ideology provides a fertile ground for moral disengagement, which erodes active solidarity for refugees (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). Politically lamenting right-wing populism and xenophobia in the context of the European refugee crisis without addressing socially corrosive undercurrents in the hegemonic economic rationality of money and markets, fails to address the roots of the problem.

Study 3: Internalization of Neoliberal Ideology Among the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged

Why individuals subscribe to political and economic ideologies that run counter to their collective interests as a social group or class, is a classic conundrum of political psychology (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). System justification theory explains this paradoxical *false consciousness* through a palliative function of ideology, serving individuals to protect their affective well-being and maintain a coherent worldview by appeasing epistemic, existential, and relational motives (Hennes et al., 2012). Drawing on theorizing and quantitative research on system justification, this study examines psychological functions of adopting neoliberal ideologies among the socio-economically disadvantaged based on rich qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews with individuals in precarious life situations and long-term unemployment were analyzed using qualitative methods. The main research question was,

how socio-economically disadvantaged persons interpret and internalize neoliberal ideological beliefs; specifically, what psychological functions neoliberal ideology fulfills for these groups, in terms of reducing cognitive dissonance and pacifying unfulfilled epistemic and existential motives.

Study 3 Methods

A Master's student in psychology conducted nine interviews with persons in precarious life situations living in Germany or Austria. Interviewees aged from their twenties to sixties; all but one were men; seven were unemployed, five long-term (more than one year); all but one received transfer income through welfare or social assistance. Most had completed some form of occupational training; two were warehouse workers, the others had occupations as construction worker, real estate clerk, photographer, physiotherapist, and sales assistant. Participants were contacted through a social organization providing support with job applications and classified online ads. Semi-structured, problem-centered interviews of about one hour took place in July 2023, either online or in-person at the social organization. Interview guidelines specified questions on the objective occupational and personal situation, subjective evaluation of the job situation, position in society, and social justice, including prompts with regard to the facets of neoliberal ideology, individualism, competition, and instrumentality, the political situation, and perceived threats. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to qualitative content analysis and hermeneutic interpretation.

Study 3 Results

Results of qualitative content analysis are organized around the three dimensions of neoliberal ideological beliefs. Each of these dimensions is represented by one of more coding themes and exemplary quotes. *Internalized individualism* was captured in three codes: a) *individualistic explanations for socio-economic disadvantage* refer to explicit or implicit beliefs that poverty and professional failure are attributable to inadequate performance (e.g., „Many, of course, are simply lazy. They don't feel like working"); b) *meritocratic beliefs* posit that wealth is based on hard work and that everyone can be successful regardless of their social background (e.g., „People who make money at the top, start small in some garage and then work their way up. So, I think anyone can do it"); c) *rejection of redistribution of income and wealth* is anchored in beliefs that wealthy people should not pay higher taxes and that social benefits should be restricted (e.g., „As a rule, you are rich if you work hard for it. I don't think you should be punished by having to pay higher taxes"). Restriction of welfare is suggested on the basis of nationality (e.g., „This [migration]

harms the welfare state, because we can't take everyone in"). *Internalized instrumentality* was coded as explicit or implicit beliefs that employees are means to serve economic interests (e.g., „The profit is simply greater if there are better social relationship at work“). *Internalized competition* was operationalized with three distinct codes: a) *skills competition* as beliefs of living in a competitive world and having to invest in oneself (e.g., „Everyone has to have certain achievements [...] and if you don't have these skills on paper, then things look very bad for you“); b) *internalized inferiority* as beliefs about being an inferior member of society and unconscious devaluation of one's own person (e.g., „My position is that I'm way down the food chain“; c) *racialized competition and xenophobia* refers to othering and resentments against migrants, who are seen as illegitimately appropriating resources (e.g., „You can't take in refugees and leave the Germans in poverty!“). Psychological functions of these internalized beliefs with regard to the reduction of cognitive dissonance, epistemic motives, and existential motives were analyzed in a hermeneutic process.

The *palliative function* of ideology was explored with regard to how neoliberal beliefs are adopted to reconcile contradictions and reduce *cognitive dissonance*. During the interviews, it could be observed, how participants' perceptions of social realities clashed with internalized ideologies, causing cognitive dissonance. Instead of reevaluating or discarding ideological convictions, these were slightly modified, which, in conjunction with a corresponding distortion of reality, served to reduce cognitive dissonance and preserve ideological beliefs. For instance, cognitive dissonance arose from perceptions of social inequality and polarization in society, clashing with ideological rejection of redistribution of wealth and income. This contradiction was resolved by the meritocratic conviction that wealth is based on hard work, legitimizing rejection of redistributive measures without denying social inequality. Perceptions regarding structural barriers and discrimination conflicted with ideological belief that everyone can be successful. However, individualistic beliefs in self-reliance allowed acknowledging that structural barriers do exist, while also maintaining that everyone is responsible for their own life situation. Lastly, experienced personal socio-economic disadvantage contrasted with the ideological tendency of system justification. Internalized inferiority postulated that personal circumstances are one's own fault due to low effort and wrong decisions, which allowed upholding that the system is overall fair and legitimate, despite one's own disadvantage.

Next, we analyzed how neoliberal ideological beliefs allowed respondents to maintain an understandable, comforting, and uncomplicated worldview by appealing to *epistemic motives* of simplicity and unambiguity, structure and order, and certainty and predictability. For instance, individualistic explanations for socio-economic

disadvantage allow attributing poverty and wealth solely to the achievements of individuals, neglecting structural and social factors, such that complex societal problems are simplified and issues of social justice are avoided. Likewise, meritocratic accounts for social injustice and adverse life situations suggest that these are personal problems that can be overcome by putting in more effort, making the social environment appear understandable, predictable, and controllable. Closely related to this rationalization, through the ideological lens of internalized inferiority, adverse life circumstances are seen as solely a consequence of one's own bad decisions, giving the impression of an orderly and structured world, where everyone gets what they deserve according to their efforts. Lastly, through racialized competition and xenophobia, social inequalities and complex problems are projected onto immigrants and refugees, facilitating simple explanations, structure and order of in-group and out-group thinking, and distraction from the monopolization of societal wealth by powerful political-economic elites.

The last aspect was explored more deeply with regard to *existential motives* of safety and security. All respondents perceived existential threats in terms of economic crisis and financial hardship, social tensions, crime, terrorism, and wars. Through *xenophobic projection and scapegoating*, migrants and refugees were blamed as the cause of perceived threats. Thus, anti-migrant attitudes serve as a defense, restoring some sentiment of safety, security, and control. Dimensions of neoliberal ideology interacted synergistically in this regard. *Individualism* manifested in beliefs that refugees are responsible for their own fate and could have had a better life in their home countries (e.g., „If you just work hard enough, you can make it anywhere“). Notions of racialized *competition* were evident in beliefs that refugees are taking resources, such as welfare, housing or jobs, from the local population, who are the „losers“ in an economic contest (e.g., „The migrants get everything, but what about the Germans?“). *Instrumentality* showed in belief that refugees are not entitled to social benefits, because they have not contributed to the economy of their host country (e.g., „My parents built this country, what have they [immigrants] contributed?“). Even if not shared unanimously, the above xenophobic interpretations of neoliberal logics were widespread among participants.

Study 3 Discussion

Respondents explicitly or implicitly endorsed neoliberal ideologies, verbalizing individualistic explanations for poverty and success, rejection of wealth redistribution, internalized inferiority, and economic utility as measure for human worth. Associated meritocratic ideological beliefs were instrumental for reducing cognitive dissonance, justifying the status quo, and appealing to epistemic needs for simplicity, unambiguity, structure, order, and

predictability of the social environment (Hennes et al., 2012; Jost et al., 2009). An emerging theme was the connection of neoliberal ideology with group-based enmity and xenophobic stereotypes (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). Perceived existential threats were projected onto immigrants, scapegoated for not taking responsibility, illegitimately appropriating resources, and insufficiently contributing to the host economy. Results show how neoliberal ideology reproduces justifications of societal inequalities and social tensions in the belief systems of those deprived by the system. The amalgamation of free market ideology with crypto-fascist themes provides an explanation for the widespread rise of right-wing populism in advanced neoliberal societies (Bandau, 2023; Pühringer & Ötsch, 2018). Confirming system justification theory, socio-economically disadvantaged groups internalize and advocate for neoliberal ideological themes that run counter to their social interests, corresponding to what critical theory has identified as a false consciousness or systemic delusions (Thompson, 2015). Psychological (dys-)functions of neoliberal ideology include short-circuiting cognitive dissonance, rationalizing perceived and experienced social inequalities and injustices, and bolstering the legitimacy of and satisfaction with the status quo. This palliative function is partly based on appeasing unfulfilled epistemic needs of simplicity, unambiguity, order, and predictability of the social environment as well as existential motives of defense against perceived, social, economic, and political threats, especially in conjunction with nationalist and xenophobic elements. While this qualitative study is limited with regard to a small selective sample, it allows illustrative insights into the psychological processes through which social inequality in neoliberal societies proliferates the dissemination of *top-down* spirals of delusions, justifying and reproducing the system *bottom-up* through the support by those who are most negatively affected (Jost et al., 2009). This idea of *self-reinforcing hegemony* means that, paradoxically, harmful consequences and threats tend to strengthen rather than challenge ideological deception and control, thus stabilizing the stratified system and its defense among those most detrimentally impacted by its dysfunctions.

Overall Summary and Discussion

Extending previous theoretical and methodological work on the internalization of neoliberal ideologies, presented above were three exemplary studies with relevance for current social and ecological crises. The first study examined relationships of system justification, neoliberal ideological beliefs, climate-protective behavior, and estimated carbon footprint in a convenience sample of students and employed persons. Controlling for environmental consciousness (attitudes, knowledge, connection) and demographic variables (gender, age,

income, status), neoliberal ideological beliefs were shown to be a manifestation of system justification and detrimental to climate-protective behavior, which, together with disposable income, determined the individual carbon footprint. The second study investigated relationships among moral disengagement from the treatment of people seeking refuge and civic engagement for their human rights in an independent convenience sample of students and employees. Controlling for demographic variables (gender, age, income, status), neoliberal ideology enabled moral disengagement, thus eroding active solidarity with refugees, especially among those with a greater sense of personal responsibility. The third study was a qualitative investigation of the psychological internalization and functions of neoliberal ideologies among socio-economically disadvantaged persons in precarious life situations and long-term unemployment. Neoliberal ideological beliefs manifested in the adoption of individualistic explanations for poverty and success, rejection of redistributive measures, and internalized representations of competition and inferiority. Such self-deprecating beliefs appeared instrumental for reducing cognitive dissonance, appeasing epistemic (structure, order, predictability) and existential (safety, defense) motives. Protection from perceived threats was sought, specifically, in a toxic amalgamation of economic ideology with xenophobic and crypto-fascist themes of in-group and out-group thinking. The resulting modified ideology appeared to serve psychological functions of restoring (denied) aspirations of superiority, upholding narratives of victimhood and appeasing a frustrated sense of entitlement. Taken together, the studies demonstrated that neoliberal ideological beliefs are negatively associated with aspects of pro-environmental consciousness and individual climate-protection, social responsibility towards refugees and civic engagement for their human rights. Moreover, neoliberal ideology reproduces justifications for societal inequalities and social tensions in the belief systems of those relatively deprived by the system. In other words, neoliberal ideological beliefs appear incompatible with attitudes and actions aimed towards socio-ecological responsibility and sustainability.

Three broader implications can be derived from the presented studies. The notion of *self-reinforcing hegemony* implies that, paradoxically, escalating social, economic, and ecological crises may lead to stronger support for neoliberal ideology to reduce cognitive dissonance, uncertainty, disorder, and perceived threats. This conjecture corresponds with the finding that system-justification increases if the system is perceived to be under threat, as in the rally-round-the-flag effect (Jost, 2019; Kay & Friesen, 2011). What may be called the *social corrosiveness of false consciousness* means that the adoption of neoliberal ideological erodes exactly those attitudes and behaviors that are important for the necessary socio-ecological transformation (Thompson, 2015). Preliminary results

also provide illustrative support for an *authoritarian and xenophobic turn in neoliberalism* (Biebricher, 2020; Bruff, 2014; Pühringer & Ötsch, 2018). Associations of market ideology with social dominance orientation and group-based enmity reveal a crypto-fascist and anti-humanist core of neoliberalism, which can be observed in frequent references to Social-Darwinist themes of competition as survival of the fittest.

The message of this research on the role of neoliberal ideology in the current socio-ecological polycrisis can be summed up in the appropriation of a political slogan: *It's the economy, stupid!* (Lawrence, 2024). Unlike its original meaning, this does not refer to the economy as a crucial factor in improving people's quality of life or winning elections, but as a root cause of the climate crisis, migration crisis, and crisis of democracy. Notably, this critique does not refer to any form of *economy* – as the conscious use of resources to satisfy needs and benefit the common good. Rather, it applies to the specific type of dehumanizing market fundamentalism promoting socio-economic inequality and polarization, subordinating ecological, social, and humanitarian concerns under the supremacy of one-sided political-economic interests (Giroux, 2005; Plehwe et al., 2007). Among others, this manifests in the unaccountable destructiveness of financial markets and harmful ideological dogmas of growth, profit maximization, and return-on-investment-driving mechanisms of capital accumulation that have progressively exposed themselves as a suicidal project for human civilization.

Outlook and Future Research

Presented research raises the question of how to reverse the vicious circle of ideology by promoting a counter-hegemony of radical humanist and ecocentric values (Carroll, 2010; Grzanka et al., 2020). Breaking the veil of harmful societal illusions and developing emancipatory consciousness resembles the project of enlightenment, continued in the *Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School* (Gunderson, 2023; Johnson, 2020). Despite the enormity of this task, some attempts have been made in the broader context of the presented research program (Hornung et al., 2021). Specifically, a conceptual dialectic extension of the model by Bal and Dóci (2018) was developed, contrasting dimensions of neoliberal ideology with humanist ideals on different levels. Drawing on analytic social psychology in the tradition of Erich Fromm, the political logics of neoliberal *individualism*, *competition*, and *instrumentality* can be allocated to self, others, and authorities (identity, interactions, and institutions) as domains of relatedness. Respective dimensions are contrasted with humanist values

of *individuation*, *solidarity*, and *emancipation* on the societal macro-level. On the meso-level of social logics applied to organizations, they manifest as practices emphasizing *self-reliance*, *contests*, and *economic rationalization*, versus *self-actualization*, *community*, and *social transformation*. On the individual micro-level of fantasmatic logics, psychodynamic orientations towards *submission*, *superiority*, and *success* are contrasted with potentialities of humanistic consciousness in terms of *empowerment*, *equality*, and *evolution*. This conceptual model has been suggested to evaluate workplace practices (Hornung & Höge, 2019a; 2019b), but also developments on the societal level, and psychodynamic tendencies in the social character of neoliberal capitalism (Hornung & Höge, 2022). However, it has not been systematically operationalized or used in quantitative or qualitative empirical studies, presenting opportunities for future research.

A related avenue refers to the continuation and extension of research on the humanistic educational potential of organizational democracy (Unterrainer et al., 2022). Democratic organizational structures and practices, and resulting perceived participation and socio-moral work climate, have been theorized and preliminarily shown to result in socializing spill-over effects from work to personality development and to prosocial, moral, and community-oriented attitudes and behaviors (Weber et al. 2009; 2020). Thus, democratic organizing and associated work experiences could act as an antidote to the socially and morally corrosive effects of neoliberal ideology (Unterrainer et al., 2024). The complex interaction of self-selection and socialization effects, however, requires further research on this *spill-over hypothesis* using sophisticated longitudinal designs. Further, existing research needs to be extended with regard to potential reciprocal dynamics between organizational structures and practices for ensuring ecological sustainability and environmental attitudes, self-efficacy, and behavior of employees. The advantage of such an emancipatory meso-level approach is that alternative democratic organizational structures and practices can be developed in participatory and deliberative ways. Such *real utopias* (Wright, 2010) potentially exert transformative upward, sideward, and downward influences on the systemic macro-level, institutional meso-level, and individual micro-level. However, this optimistic vision is dialectically complemented by the pessimistic view that overarching system imperatives of neoliberal capitalism inevitably denigrate and assimilate any alternatives. Between these dialectic poles, however, resides hope, paradoxically, especially in light of compounding social and ecological catastrophes, sending a loud, clear, and powerful message that radical change is unavoidable and, in fact, a matter of survival.

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