

Neoliberal Ideology and Moral Disengagement from People Seeking Refuge

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Abstract

The refugee crisis in Europe involves growing numbers of people fleeing from human rights violations, climate disasters, and poverty in their home countries, combined with social tensions towards displaced people, bolstered by right-wing populism. Rather than providing a democratic backdrop against xenophobic incivility, the competitive, individualistic, instrumental logic of neoliberal capitalism appears to feed into collective moral disengagement from the suffering of asylum seekers. Empirically examined is the role of the political-economic ideology of neoliberalism in processes of moral disengagement from inhumane treatment of people seeking refuge and erosion of civic engagement for human rights of displaced persons. An online survey in Austria and Germany (N = 276) was analyzed using multiple regression. Neoliberal ideology was measured with a validated 24-item instrument; an adapted 16-item scale assessed moral disengagement from the treatment refugees; civic engagement was measured with 9 dichotomous items from an activism checklist, including influencing others, circulating petitions, attending protests, donating money, and political volunteering. Controlled were age, gender, education, income, and social status. Moral disengagement fully mediated a negative relationship between neoliberal ideology and civic engagement for the human rights of migrants. A significant interaction term suggests a compensatory relationship of neoliberal ideology and moral disengagement with regard to civic engagement. In conclusion, roots of moral disengagement and eroding civic engagement for human rights of refugees are found in the socially corrosive ideology of neoliberalism, emphasizing self-reliance, competition for resources, and instrumentality of humans for economic ends. Politically lamenting right-wing populism without problematizing crypto-fascist undercurrents in economic rationality appears futile and dishonest.

Keywords: neoliberal ideology; political psychology; refugee crisis, moral disengagement; civic engagement