

# Psychological Functions of Neoliberal Ideology for the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged

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## Abstract

The question 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. System justification theory explains this paradoxical “false consciousness” through a palliative function of ideology, serving individuals to maintain a coherent worldview and protect their self-worth by appeasing unfulfilled epistemic, existential, and relational motives. 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 (N = 9) individuals in precarious life situations and/or long-term unemployment were subjected to content analysis and hermeneutic interpretation. Respondents either explicitly or implicitly endorsed neoliberal ideologies by 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. An emerging theme was the connection of neoliberal ideology with group-based enmity and xenophobic stereotypes. 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

Discussed are limitations arising from this study’s focus on socio-economically disadvantaged persons and the relatively small and homogenous sample as well as the need to integrate and

contrast different sociodemographic perspectives in future research. themes provides an explanation for the widespread rise of right-wing populism in advanced neoliberal societies.

**Keywords:** neoliberal ideology; political psychology; system-justification; socio-economically disadvantaged groups; xenophobia