

Dangerous Delusions: Towards a Psychology of Neoliberal Ideological Beliefs in the Ecological, Social, and Political Polycrisis

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Abstract: This presentation reports a first wave of studies from a research program on the psychological significance of neoliberal ideology in the socio-politico-ecological polycrisis. Neoliberalism not only enforces globally dominant political-economic practices of market expansion, entrepreneurial freedom, dismantling the welfare state, and supremacy of capital interests, but also pervades psychological processes, belief systems, and behaviors. After reviewing theoretical and methodological foundations on system-justifying neoliberal ideologies, exemplary empirical results are reported, pertaining to the ecological climate crisis, the social crisis of eroding civil solidarity, and the legitimization crisis of liberal democracies. All are addressed in survey studies using the neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire with sub-dimensions of individualism, competition, and instrumentality. The first study examined relationships with system justification, environmental consciousness, climate-protective behavior, and estimated carbon footprint, confirming a detrimental role of neoliberal ideological beliefs. The second study established connections between neoliberal ideological beliefs, moral disengagement, and lacking civic engagement for people seeking refuge. The third study explored correlational patterns of neoliberal beliefs, political attitudes, and party preferences, showing a tendency towards right-wing populism and social dominance orientation. Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted among socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Contradicting their social interests, participants endorsed neoliberal individualism, competition, and instrumentality, evidenced by meritocratic explanations for poverty and rejection of wealth redistribution. Underlying psychological processes were reduction of cognitive dissonance and appeasement of epistemic and existential motives. Psychodynamics of neoliberal ideologies in the polycrisis are highlighted, including self-reinforcing spirals, corrosion of transformative capacities, and the xenophobic authoritarian turn. Implications for following waves of research are discussed.

Keywords: Neoliberal Ideology, System Justification, Polycrisis, Climate Crisis, Refugee Crisis, Crisis Of Democracy, Social And Political Psychology

Introduction

In the past decades, political-economic policies, practices, and discourses of globalized neoliberal financial capitalism have become increasingly hegemonic. This means that they are now so widespread, pervasive, and normalized that they are typically not called into question, but appear self-evident as political and economic “common sense”, despite their observable negative effects and internal contradictions (Höge & Hornung, 2024; Skyrman et al., 2023). As part of this process of subtle or “soft” indoctrination, the internalization of economic rationalities and identity constructions has substantially affected perceptions, attitudes, belief systems and ways of thinking among the general population (Hornung et al., 2021). There is an increasing explicit and tacit acceptance of the normative model of the “rational utility maximizer” or “homo oeconomicus”, who is securing calculated returns from investments in his or her “human capital” (e.g., education, reputation, experience) and takes entrepreneurial initiative and risks in competitive market-based transactions that extend to all areas of life, including social relationships (Adams et al., 2019; Fleming, 2017; Hearn, 2021; Teo, 2018). Critical theorists have analyzed this development not as progress, but as a form of “colonization”, whereby social norms and humanistic values are eroded and displaced by neoliberal economic logics of individualism, competition, and instrumentality (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Hornung et al., 2025b; LaMothe, 2016). From this vantage point,

neoliberalism represents a manipulative and socially destructive ideology that serves the vested interests of powerful political-economic elites at the expense of environment and the common good for the majority of people. The escalating socio-ecological polycrisis has raised the question whether neoliberal capitalism can ever be part of the solution to the current global challenges or needs to be fundamentally transformed beyond recognition to become sustainable (Kommandeur et al., 2025; Petrova, 2024; Temper et al., 2018). These contemporary developments and considerations formed the backdrop for initiating a research program into the role of neoliberal ideology in the socio-ecological crisis from the perspective of applied psychology.

Objectives

The goal of this contribution is to provide a preliminary overview of an ongoing research program in applied psychology on the ecological, social, and political significance and implications of internalized neoliberal ideological beliefs in the context of the socio-ecological polycrisis (Hornung et al., 2021). While the broader research program includes both theoretical (Hornung et al., 2025b) and empirical (Hornung et al., 2025a) components, the focus here will be on the latter. Theoretical and methodological contributions on system-justifying neoliberal ideologies and their operationalization are briefly mentioned with special attention to their implications in current crisis dynamics (Milstein, 2021). The polycrisis is conceptualized as a complex of compounding detrimental ecological, economic, social, and political developments, conflicts and contradictions (Rakowski et al., 2025). These are culminating in environmental and human catastrophes, government failure to adequately address the underlying problems, and widespread threats to liberal democracies in Europe and elsewhere by right-wing populist movements. In this context, exemplary results from several empirical studies are reported, linking internalized neoliberal ideological beliefs to psychological dynamics associated with important ecological, social, and political aspects of the escalating polycrisis. The broader, ongoing research program seeks to answer not only the question why humanity appears to be incapable to adequately respond to the grand challenges of our time, but also what can be done to break out of this state of self-inflicted immaturity to overcome ideological paralysis (Bohman, 2005; Gunderson, 2023). As such, it calls for a renewal of the promises of enlightenment in a world in perpetual crisis.

Methods

Increasing scholarly interest in the socially corrosive effects on neoliberalism has led to the development of several self-report instruments, such as the neoliberal beliefs inventory by Bay-Cheng and coauthors (2015), comprising the dimensions of system inequality, competition, personal wherewithal, and government interference. A more recently introduced scale is the neoliberal orientation questionnaire by Girerd and colleagues (2023), which consists of the four dimensions of competitiveness, individual self-regulation, relational detachment, and public divestment. Validity and utility of these scales notwithstanding, the present study is based on an alternative instrument, the neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire (Hornung et al. 2025a), developed specifically to operationalize the model by Bal and Dóci (2018). This newly developed scale comprises the three dimensions of a) individualism, emphasizing self-reliance and self-interest; b) competition, as the need to outperform others to be successful; and c) instrumentality, portraying humans as resources for economic ends. Aside from the theory-based dimensionality, this instrument differs from other scales in its focus on employment and economy, rather than a combination of personal attitudes and broader societal or policy aspects. As described elsewhere in more detail (Hornung et al. 2025a), the scale was validated in several German and Austrian samples, including factor structure, internal consistencies, convergent validation with a broad range of constructs (e.g., dark triad of personality, group-based enmity, prosocial and moral behavior), and incremental validity in explaining additional variance in other construct over the neoliberal beliefs inventory by Bay-Cheng et al. (2015). Based on this methodological development, exemplary results of three empirical investigations are reported, all of which are

survey studies, based on convenience samples of several hundred employees and students. Study constructs were assessed with sophisticated multi-item self-report research scales, subjected to psychometric testing. In the first two studies, data were analyzed using multiple linear regressions and structural equation modelling. The third study was based on the interpretation of correlational patterns in a larger sample. Further, an increasing number of studies have used qualitative methods to explore and elaborate the psychological processes associated with the internalization of neoliberal ideology and its consequences based on interview data (Girerd et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2024). Following this approach of methodological triangulation, an in-depth interview study with a smaller number of persons in precarious economic situations and long-term unemployment was conducted. Qualitative content analysis and hermeneutic interpretation were used to capture the subjectivity of participants in making sense of the status quo of social, political, and economic arrangements and their own subordinated roles in society.

Results

The presented findings suggest multiple corrosive roles of neoliberal ideology in ecological, social and political crises. In the first study, controlling for gender, age, education, and social status, a chain of serial mediation effects was established. System justification tendencies acted as antecedents to neoliberal ideological beliefs of individualism, competition, and instrumentality, which negatively predicted climate-protective behavior related to housing, energy, mobility, consumption, nutrition, and activism (Feygina et al., 2010; Milfont et al., 2021). Climate-protective behavior, in turn, was instrumental to reduce the personal carbon footprint, estimated based on objective, quantifiable aspects of housing, electricity, mobility, food choices, and consumption, according to a model by the German Federal Environment Agency. Consequently, the positive effects of environmental consciousness, operationalized in terms of attitudes towards environmental protection (e.g., interventionist policies, environmental fragility, eco-centric concern), ecological knowledge, and felt connection with nature, on climate-protective behavior, appeared to be counteracted and overcompensated by the negative influence of neoliberal ideological beliefs (Fremstad & Paul, 2022). Additionally, income level was a substantial predictor of consumption-based carbon emissions. The second study addressed connections between neoliberal ideological beliefs, moral distancing from the often inhumane treatment of migrants and asylum seekers (e.g., moral justification, euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility, dehumanization), and lacking civic engagement for people seeking refuge and the human rights of migrants (e.g., circulating petitions, attending protests, donating money, demanding political action). Controlling for demographic variables, moral disengagement from the suffering of people seeking refuge mediated a negative effect of neoliberal ideological beliefs on active solidarity for refugees (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). Additional analyses revealed an unexpected compensatory interaction between the two predictors, such that only when moral disengagement was low, active solidarity with people seeking refuge was high, but was eroded by internalized neoliberal ideology. The third study investigated the political structure of neoliberal ideological beliefs, exploring correlational patterns with party preferences in a larger subsample. Participants rated the extent to which main political parties in Austria and Germany corresponded to their own political views. In both countries, neoliberal ideological beliefs correlated negatively with support for the ecological green party, social democrats, and democratic socialists, but positively with endorsement of conservative, economic liberal, and right-wing populist parties, particularly, the far-right extremist Alternative for Germany and the Freedom Party of Austria. Moreover, ratings on the neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire shared about a quarter of variance with political left-right self-placement (Lesschaeve, 2017) and social dominance orientation (Ho et al., 2015). To further explore these findings, a qualitative interview study with socio-economically disadvantaged persons was conducted. Accordingly, individuals in precarious life situations and long-term unemployment endorsed neoliberal political-economic practices and discourses of individualism, competition, and instrumentality, reciting meritocratic explanations

for poverty and success, rejecting the redistribution of income and wealth, and demanding limits on social welfare, especially for migrants and people seeking refuge (Ayers, 2024; Palley, 2024). In sum, several participants explicitly or implicitly adopted right-wing, xenophobic, and racist views in conjunction with perceived existential threats of economic crisis and social competition.

Discussion

The breadth and heterogeneity of presented exemplary results on the psychological relevance of neoliberal ideology for aspects of the socio-ecological and political-economic polycrisis pose a challenge as well as an advantage (Hornung et al., 2025a). With regard to the ecological dimension, findings support the assumption that market-based consumer societies subject individuals to ambivalent and contradictory messages concerning climate protection. System-justifying neoliberal ideologies and disposable income for consumption were shown to undermine the transformational intentions associated with environmental consciousness, leading to lower climate-protective behavior and a higher personal carbon footprint (Fremstad & Paul, 2022; Hamilton & Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2023). In the social dimension, the roots of moral disengagement and a lack of civic engagement for human rights of refugees were also found in the socially corrosive ideology of neoliberalism (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). Emphasizing complete self-reliance of individuals, competition for resources, and instrumentality of humans for economic ends, neoliberal ideological beliefs appear incompatible with taking social responsibility for others and showing active solidarity (Beattie, 2019; Hearn, 2021). This tendency is confirmed in associated political attitudes, indicating a tendency towards conservative, authoritarian, and elitist views, rejecting the prioritization of social and ecological issues (Azevedo et al. 2019). Overall, results in the political dimension support the convergence of neoliberal capitalism towards right-wing authoritarianism, previously suggested by several authors (Biebricher, 2020; Bruff, 2014; Pühringer & Ötsch, 2018). The common ground of neoliberalism and authoritarianism is seen in an ideological preference for inequality and logics of superiority and inferiority, based on notions of pursuit of self-interest, competition for resources, and strife for domination (Azevedo et al., 2019; Beattie, 2019; Goudarzi et al., 2022). Demonstrating the validity of the concept of “false consciousness,” persons in precarious life situations and long-term unemployment tended to contradict their collective social interest by either explicitly or implicitly endorsing neoliberal ideologies (Jost, 1995; Stahl, 2024). Such self-defeating attitudes manifested in the verbalization of individualistic explanations for poverty and success, rejection of the redistribution of societal wealth, internalized inferiority, and accepting economic utility as a criterion for human worth (Napier et al., 2020). 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 (Jost et al., 2003). An emerging theme was the connection of neoliberal ideology with group-based enmity and xenophobic stereotypes, connecting to results on moral disengagement from the suffering of refugees and support for far-right political parties (Micocci & Di Mario, 2017; Palley, 2024; Patnaik, 2020). Perceived existential threats were projected onto immigrants, scapegoated for lacking self-reliance, illegitimately appropriating resources, and insufficiently contributing to the host economy. Overall, results demonstrate how neoliberal ideology instrumentalizes epistemic and existential motives to reproduce the justification of societal inequalities and social tensions in the belief systems of those deprived of gainful employment and work-related recognition (Pühringer & Ötsch, 2018). The observed psychological hybridization of free market ideology with crypto- or proto-fascist themes (Palley, 2024) provides a compelling explanation for the widespread rise of right-wing populism in advanced neoliberal societies traumatized by recurring waves of economic crisis and austerity. At the same time, the presented results open up new venues for combating democratic backsliding and decivilization by addressing their economic roots.

Outlook

Results presented here are part of a first wave of empirical studies using the newly developed neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire and supplementary qualitative research. Future follow-up research will expand this foundation in several directions. For instance, research on the role of neoliberal ideological beliefs in the crisis of mental health is currently ongoing (Becker et al., 2021; Card & Hepburn, 2023). Specifically, this refers to new forms of psychological stress and strain at work, based on internalized performance pressure and self-endangering coping behavior in response to management practices of indirect control through goal setting and contingent employment (Knecht et al., 2027; Telford & Briggs, 2022). Another ongoing survey study focuses on relationships among equity principles, neoliberal ideological beliefs, and support or rejection of societal redistribution of wealth and income (Bettache et al., 2020; Goudarzi et al., 2022). Future research is also planned to explore the dynamics between precarious employment and internalization of neoliberal ideologies. In terms of research design, while the mixed-methods approach has been proven fruitful, a stronger correspondence between the foci and contents of quantitative and qualitative components is aimed for. Lastly, follow-up research will complement the dimension of internalized beliefs with observed environmental neoliberal manifestations (Becker et al., 2021) as well as include theoretically elaborated constructs of counter-hegemonic humanistic consciousness (Grzanka et al., 2020; Hornung et al., 2025b) in quantitative and qualitative empirical investigations. A logical next step will be the development of interventions to deliberately and collectively reflect on, question, challenge, and revise ecologically, socially, and politically harmful economic beliefs, discourses, and practices on different levels.

Conclusions

Disproving relativist positions, neoliberal beliefs do not just reflect a legitimate, albeit possibly reductionist or biased, political-economic worldview, but a dangerous system of delusions, threatening the ecological, social, and political basis of democratic societies and, arguably, even human civilization as a whole (Bettache et al., 2020; Fremstad & Paul, 2022; Gunderson, 2023). More specifically, from the presented results, three broader conclusions can be derived. First, the notion of a self-reinforcing hegemony implies that, paradoxically, escalating ecological social, political, and economic crises may not lead to challenging and fundamentally rethinking the current course of action, but to even more aggressive support for neoliberal ideologies to reduce cognitive dissonance, uncertainty, disorder, and perceived existential threats. This conjecture aligns with the finding that system justification increases when the system is perceived as under threat, as in the rally-round-the-flag effect (Lambert et al., 2011). Secondly, what could be called the social corrosiveness of false consciousness refers to the conundrum that the adoption of neoliberal ideology appears to erode exactly those attitudes and behaviors that are prerequisites for the necessary socio-ecological transformation, such as pro-environmental, prosocial and democratic engagement. Thirdly, the obtained results also provide illustrative support for a previously diagnosed and highly concerning authoritarian and xenophobic turn in late-neoliberal capitalism (Bruff, 2014; Gallo, 2022). Associations of free-market ideology with far-right populism, social dominance orientation, and group-based enmity reveal an anti-humanist and proto-fascist core of neoliberalism, which can also be observed in frequent references to social-Darwinist themes of competition as “survival of the fittest”. (Ayers, 2024; Micocci & Di Mario, 2017; Palley, 2024). To conclude, the economy, as the domain where contemporary societies tend to look for the solution of all problems, may actually be at the very roots of them. Effectively addressing the polycrisis threatening human civilization requires fundamentally rethinking economic principles and systems toward a conscious use of resources for the common good (Durand et al., 2024), rather than for the sake of blind, destructive capital accumulation, benefitting a small minority in the short term, but destroying the planet and harming everybody in the long run (Stuart et al., 2025). The neoliberal fantasy of perpetual extraction, competition,

valorization, and growth is a dangerous system of delusions that needs to be overcome for genuine progress to be possible.

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