

Internalized Neoliberal Ideology and Socio-Economic Precarity: A Qualitative Study on False Consciousness Among the Disadvantaged

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on insights of system justification theory, this qualitative study investigates psychological functions of the internalization of neoliberal ideology among socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Interviews with nine individuals in precarious life situations and long-term unemployment confirm that respondents widely endorse neoliberal ideological beliefs related to logics of individualism, instrumentality and competition, which contradict their collective social interests. This includes individualistic explanations for poverty and success, rejection of wealth redistribution, introjected labor market requirements, and internalized inferiority. Reduction of cognitive dissonance and appeasement of epistemic and existential motives, such as simplicity, order, control, and safety, reinforce this self-marginalizing false consciousness. To manage perceived existential threats, hybridizations of market-based and xenophobic themes were endorsed, corresponding with theorizing and observations of an authoritarian and proto-fascist turn of neoliberalism. Psychodynamic functions and implications of internalized neoliberal ideology in reproducing and escalating inequalities, social tensions, and political crises are discussed and avenues for future research explored.

KEYWORDS: Neoliberal political-economic ideology, system justification, false consciousness, socio-economic stratification, xenophobia and racism

1. Introduction

The question why individuals and social groups actively support political parties, economic policies, and systems of governance that contradict the collective interests associated with their position in society is a classic conundrum of political psychology (Chang & Kang, 2018; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost et al., 2009). Drawing on the Marxist concept of “false consciousness” (Eyerman, 1981; Stahl, 2024), system justification theory explains this paradoxical phenomenon through the “palliative function” of political-economic ideologies that legitimize the status quo (Jost, 1995; 2019). Accordingly, these delusions help individuals to maintain a coherent worldview and protect their affective well-being by appeasing epistemic, existential, and relational motives (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Hennes et al., 2012). False consciousness, in this context, means that people are unaware of their social interests and complicit in their own oppression, internalizing the perspective of the dominating powers (Hornung, 2024). This is expressed in the famous dictum by Marx that the “ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (quoted in Seeck et al., 2020; p. 64). System justification has been shown to be a broadly applicable and generalizable concept with relevance to various political, economic, and social affairs (Jost, 2019; 2020). Surprisingly little research has applied this theory to the doctrines of neoliberal capitalism (Harvey, 2007; Höge & Hornung, 2024), which, within the last decades, has evolved into the globally hegemonic ideology—increasingly unchallenged and taken for granted, colonizing all areas of society and the human psyche with interest-guided utilitarian market logics (Adams et al., 2019; Beattie, 2019; Giroux, 2005; LaMothe, 2016; Plehwe et al., 2007). Thus, neoliberal capitalism has created a nearly total system of delusions, more encompassing and perfidious than overtly oppressive, exploitative, and violent systems of domination and stratification (Hornung et al., 2025a; 2025b). This new quality of mind control has been examined as advanced “neoliberal governmentality” (Munro, 2012; Larner, 2000), the marketing character (Foster, 2017) or the subjectivity of “homo neoliberalus” (Teo, 2018). Lately, the socially and ethically corrosive consequences of neoliberal ideology have been problematized in psychology (Merhej & Makarem, 2025), leading to the development of several self-report scales and an emerging stream of quantitative research (Bay-Cheng, et al., 2015; Becker et al., 2021; Girerd et al., 2021; Höge et al., 2026). Fewer studies have employed qualitative methodologies (Girerd et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2024; Seubert et al., 2025). Further, an integration of system justification theory and research on neoliberal ideology is still lacking. Seeking to fill some of these blank spaces, this article presents an interview study of individuals in situations of socio-economic precarity. This design allows exploring notions of false consciousness, based on the internalization of neoliberal ideology among socially disadvantaged groups, to which some of the most disconcerting predictions of system justification theory apply.

2. Theoretical Background and Previous Research

2.1. System Justification Theory

Based on a theoretically well-founded and empirically prolific stream of research spanning several decades, system justification theory (Jost, 2019; 2020) has established that members of any society have a strong motivational tendency to accept, defend, justify, and legitimize the prevailing social, economic, and political arrangements, portraying them as overall reasonable, just or at least without viable alternatives. This “normative power of the factual” (Forst, 2017) is attributed to resonance with deep-seated epistemic, existential, and relational needs, constituting aspects of the human motivational substructure (Hennes et al., 2012). Paradoxically, system justification seems to be particularly widespread and possibly even more prevalent or stronger in particular among those social groups that are disadvantaged or marginalized by the respective political and economic conditions (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003; for an overview see: Lima et al., 2025). What seems counterintuitive at first becomes more comprehensible when taking into account the so-called “palliative function” of system-justification (Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Napier et al., 2020), that is, its capacity to decrease negative emotions, while increasing subjective wellbeing and satisfaction with the current state of affairs. Underlying psychological processes are examined in this study.

In an influential overview, Jost and Hunyady (2005) have presented a compilation of what they deemed the most important system-justifying ideologies at the time, specifically, 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. Key contents of these ideologies are summarized in Table 1. Despite their heterogeneity, all of them share some common features. For instance, an ideology of meritocracy posits that personal success and failure in society is a direct result of an individual’s ability, motivation, and efforts (Trevisan et al., 2022). This relates to the belief in a just world, the notion that, eventually, everybody gets what they deserve (Correia et al., 2024). According to fair market ideology, mechanisms of supply and demand lead to an efficient, unbiased, and just distribution of outcomes (Jost, Blount, et al., 2003). 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 hierarchies and inequality are necessary or even desirable (Ho et al., 2015; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018). Related assumptions underlie the ideologies of economic system justification, power distance, and opposition to inequality. With slightly different connotations, political conservatism and right-wing authoritarianism legitimize and defend traditional societal hierarchies, inequalities, and power structures (Sinn & Hayes, 2018). While the compilation presented by Jost and Hunyady (2005) two decades ago is

still relevant today, what is missing is the currently dominant system-justifying ideology of neoliberalism, which synthesizes core aspects of work ethic, meritocracy, opposition to equality, and fair market ideology, among others (Hearn, 2021; Lazzarato, 2009). Indeed, a growing body of quantitative and qualitative research suggests that neoliberal ideology has assumed the function of a superordinate, pervasive, multi-dimensional complex of system justifying delusions (Girerd et al., 2021; 2023). This at least is also a basic assumption of the present study.

Social observations and empirical research have shown that both advantaged or privileged and disadvantaged or marginalized groups in society (e.g., based on gender, race, class or status) internalize and advocate for ideologies of system justification, albeit with slightly different implications (Lima et al., 2025). Similarities and differences for these two broader groups, as summarized by Jost and Hunyady (2005), are reproduced in Table 2. Accordingly, for both groups, system justification has palliative effects by increasing positive (e.g., satisfaction, contentment) and decreasing negative affect (e.g., frustration, anger, guilt or shame). While for the advantaged this also implies increased self-esteem, subjective well-being, and positive attitudes toward their own group (in-group favoritism), for the disadvantaged, this rationalization comes at the cost of decreased self-esteem and more negative views of their own group (lower in-group favoritism), combined with an idealization of socially dominating, advantaged groups (higher out-group favoritism).

Contrary to the predictions of Jost and Hunyady (2005), it appears that the subjective well-being of disadvantaged groups can also be elevated by the palliative effect of engaging in system justification, possibly by providing individuals with a sense of control and an illusion of non-discrimination and upward social mobility (Lima et al., 2025). For both advantaged and disadvantaged groups, system justification results in increased legitimacy, fairness, and approval of the political-economic system as well as decreased support for social change and disapproval of measures to address social inequality and injustice in society. Thus, system justification theory provides an explanation for the issue of “false consciousness” of socially deprived groups, opposing policies that possibly could lead to the improvement of their collective situation.

2.2. Psychological Internalization of Ideologies

Fundamental to system justification theory is a critical concept of ideology as a dominant or hegemonic system of ideas, practices, and discourses that serve the interests of powerful political-economic elites (Klikauer, 2019; Stahl, 2024). A psychological model of the dynamic interplay of self-selection and socialization processes in the proliferation of political ideologies was developed by Jost and colleagues (2009). Accordingly, system justifying ideologies are constructed and

disseminated “top-down” in society by political, economic, intellectual, and socio-cultural elites as a discursive superstructure (Laskin, 2019). Rather than a rational and consciously planned and coordinated process, this construction and dissemination needs to be understood as an implied and emergent process, based on convergence of interests among those elites (Schmidt-Catran & Czymara, 2023; Van Boven & Sherman, 2021). Exposed societal members adopt, endorse, and internalize the respective political-economic and socio-cultural beliefs and attitudes in psychodynamic “bottom-up” processes based (and depending) on their motivational substructure. The latter consist of unfulfilled psychological needs, desires, and vulnerabilities that influence the receptiveness to specific ideological positions (Hennes et al., 2012). This internalization, however, is not a deterministic process, in which people are passive recipients of domination, but they possess at least some level of agency and choice. The concept of “elective affinity” has been used to describe the mutual attraction between the structure and contents of ideological belief systems and the motivational dispositions of their adherents (Jost et al., 2009).

The psychological basis of the internalization of specific ideological beliefs is described as the configuration of relational, epistemic, and existential motives (Hennes et al., 2012; Jost, 2017; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Relational motives refer to the need for social connection, group-based identity, and shared reality. Epistemic motives describe a cognitive preference for structure, order, and closure, including low tolerance for ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty, and closed-mindedness with regard to elaboration, experience, and reflection (Biddlestone et al., 2025). Existential motives manifest in individual differences in the need to manage threats and maintain a sense of security, safety, and self-esteem, which tend to be enhanced by beliefs that the world is a dangerous place, characterized by continuous struggle and competition (Radkiewicz & Skarżyńska, 2021). Partly a result of the former, the motive for system justification refers to individual and socio-cultural differences with regard to the need to rationalize and defend the status quo and to perceive the existing social order as overall fair, legitimate, and desirable (Vesper et al., 2022).

The relevance of individual differences notwithstanding, contextual influences also seem to play an important role in the internalization of system justifying ideologies (Friesen et al., 2019). These circumstances include perceptions of risks and threats against the broader social or economic system and oneself, as well as perceived dependence, inescapability, and helplessness (Prusova, & Gorokhova, 2025). Judging from these results, it becomes clearer why especially marginalized individuals and groups in socio-economically disadvantaged and precarious situations are vulnerable to the psychologically relieving and “sedating” effects of system justification, despite the self-defeating content of these ideologies.

Table 1. Examples of System-Justifying Ideologies

Ideology	Descriptive Content
Protestant work ethic	People have a moral responsibility to work hard and avoid leisure activities; hard work is a virtue and is its own reward.
Meritocratic ideology	The system rewards individual ability and motivation, so success is an indicator of personal deservingness.
Fair market ideology	Market-based procedures and outcomes are not only efficient but are inherently fair, legitimate, and just.
Economic system justification	Economic inequality is natural, inevitable, and legitimate; economic outcomes are fair and deserved.
Belief in a just world	People typically get what they deserve and deserve what they get; with regard to outcomes, what “is” is what “ought” to be.
Power distance	Inequality is a natural and desirable feature of the social order; large power differences are acceptable and legitimate.
Social dominance orientation	Some groups are superior to others; group-based hierarchy is a good thing.
Opposition to equality	Increased social and economic equality is unattainable and undesirable; it would be detrimental for society.
Right-wing authoritarianism	People should follow conventional traditions and established authorities and stop getting rebellious ideas.
Political conservatism	Traditional institutions in society should be preserved; social and economic inequality is acceptable and natural.

Source: Jost and Hunyady (2005).

Table 2. Consequences of Endorsement of System-Justifying Ideologies for Members of Advantaged and Disadvantaged Groups

Constructs	Operational definitions	Consequences of system justification for advantaged groups	Consequences of system justification for disadvantaged groups
Positive and negative affect	Self-report ratings of (a) happiness, satisfaction, contentment, and general positive affect; and (b) frustration, anger, guilt, shame, discomfort, and general negative affect	Increased positive affect, decreased negative affect	Increased positive affect, decreased negative affect
Self-esteem, subjective well-being	Scores on self-report measures of individual self-esteem, depression, and neuroticism	Increased self-esteem, subjective well-being	Decreased self-esteem, subjective well-being
In-group versus out-group favoritism	Favorability of (implicit and explicit) attitudes toward one's own group relative to the favorability of attitudes toward other groups	Increased in-group favoritism	Decreased in-group favoritism (increased out-group favoritism)
Perceived legitimacy of authorities and institutions	Trust and approval of the government, support for restricting criticism of the government, belief in the fairness of the economic system	Increased perceptions of legitimacy	Increased perceptions of legitimacy
Support for social change and redistribution of resources	Support for policies of redistribution in educational and employment contexts; willingness to support community service programs to help the disadvantaged	Decreased support for social change	Decreased support for social change

Source: Jost and Hunyady (2005).

2.3. Internalized Neoliberal Ideological Beliefs

The globally dominant form of system justification, the political-economic ideology of neoliberal capitalism, broadly refers to affirmative beliefs regarding market fundamentalist ideas, practices, and discourses, justifying social and economic inequality, austerity, and stratification (Azevedo et al., 2019; Goudarzi et al., 2022; Höge & Hornung, 2024; Ötsch & Pühringer, 2017). The ideology of neoliberalism was developed in postwar Europe by the elitist, anti-socialist Mont Pèlerin Society, dominated by free-market-fundamentalists von Hayek and Friedman (Eagleton-Pierce, 2021; Harvey, 2007; Höge & Hornung, 2024). The first neoliberal experiment was committed during the fascist military dictatorship in Chile, assisted by the Chicago school of economics, led by Friedman. In the 1980s neoliberalism was the basis for hyper-capitalist policies of Thatcherism and Reaganomics. As structural reforms, it was imposed with devastating effects on countries in the Global South (Haskaj, 2018). Since then, neoliberalism has evolved into the hegemonic ideology of global financial capitalism, penetrating all areas of economy and society (Hornung et al., 2025a; 2025b). On the level of political-economic practices, neoliberalism demands expansion and deregulation of markets, entrepreneurial and corporate “freedoms”; international finance and trade, low taxes for capital, privatization of public assets, demolition of social welfare systems, and restricting environmental and labor laws (Harvey, 2007; Skyrman et al., 2023; Wacquant, 2009). On the psychological level, it enforces neoliberal governmentality, a subjectivity based on the normative model of the self-interested, utility-maximizing “homo oeconomicus”, investing in its “human capital” and constructing its social identity like a competitive enterprise (Fleming, 2017; Hornung et al., 2021; Teo, 2018). Recently, political scientists have observed a shift towards more authoritarian versions of neoliberalism, blending free-market ideology with nationalist, technocratic, and autocratic rollbacks of democracy and civil rights (Biebricher, 2020; Bruff, 2014; Gallo, 2022). This development has led several authors (Palley, 2024; Patnaik, 2020; Micocci & Di Mario, 2017) to see confirmation of a proto-fascist core in the economic and dehumanizing ideology of market fundamentalism.

Following the influential model by Bal and Dóci (2018), neoliberal ideology shapes societal institutions, work organizations, and mindsets of people via pervasive political, social, and fantasmatic logics related to individualism, instrumentality, and competition (Hornung et al., 2025a). These dimensions have been theoretically elaborated by Hornung et al. (2025b) and operationalized in a self-report instrument on internalized neoliberal ideological beliefs by Höge et al. (2026). They are outlined in Table 3 in terms of their affirmative contents, naturalizing tendencies, and negation of humanist alternatives. Self-interest, self-reliance, and complete responsibility of individuals for their outcomes, the use of humans for economic ends in employment, and market competition as the ideal

organizing principle, are portrayed as rational and inherent in or aligned with human nature (Eagleton-Pierce, 2021; Radkiewicz & Skarżyńska, 2021). Simultaneously, humanist alternatives of collective egalitarianism, recognition of inherent dignity, and prosocial cooperation are denigrated as unfeasible and utopian. Drawing on these definitions, to our knowledge, this is the first qualitative study on the internalization of neoliberal individualism instrumentality, and competition (Bal & Dóci, 2018). Focusing on socio-economically disadvantaged groups allows linking research on neoliberal ideologies with long-standing assumptions on false consciousness in system justification theory.

Table 3. Dimensions of Neoliberal Ideological Beliefs

Dimensions / Components	Individualism	Instrumentality	Competition
Affirmation	Individual self-interest and self-reliance are basic human features; individuals are solely and fully responsible for their own success, health, and happiness	Using humans as instruments for economic ends is justified; employees are a means or a resource utilized to achieve organizational profit goals	Market competition is the best principle to efficiently allocate resources and ensure quality of goods and services, innovation, and human performance
Naturalization	Self-interest and self-reliance are inherent in human nature; necessary for the functioning of organizations, economy and society	Prioritizing economic interests and using others is part of human nature, necessary for the functioning of, societies	Rivalry and competition are inevitable, aligned with human nature, and necessary basis for societies and organizations
Negation	Egalitarian and collectivist orientations and practices framed as constraining coercion, causing ineffectiveness and stagnation	Humanistic view of employees as ends in themselves with inherent value and dignity as unrealistic and wishful thinking	Cooperation and prosocial behavior as social loafing and rational only for increasing performance and competitiveness

Source: Based on Höge et al. (2026).

2.4. Research Interest

Based on reviewed theorizing and quantitative research on system justification, this study set out to investigate the manifestations and psychological functions of the internalization of neoliberal ideologies among the socio-economically disadvantaged. The main research question was how persons in precarious life situations and without secure income interpret and internalize neoliberal ideological beliefs that run counter to their collective social interests as a socio-economically marginalized group. More specifically, the research interest was to find out what psychological functions this self-defeating form of false consciousness fulfills for these individuals, in terms of reducing cognitive dissonance and resonating with epistemic and existential needs for order, unambiguity, controllability, justice, and management of threats.

3. Methods

Nine semi-structured interviews with persons in precarious life situations were conducted by an advanced student of psychology at the University of Innsbruck in the context of her Master's thesis research project. The sample is described in Table 4. Participants lived in Germany or Austria and were aged in their twenties to sixties (26-64 years). Eight were men. Seven were unemployed, five of these long-term, for over one year; one held two casual low-income jobs; one was employed part-time by a work agency. All except one received transfer income in the form of welfare or social assistance. While two had only finished secondary basic or middle school, most had completed some occupational training. Two were warehouse workers; 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 (45-60 minutes) took place in July 2023, either online (4) or in person (5), on the premises of the social organization. Interview guidelines specified questions on a) the objective professional and personal situation; b) the subjective evaluation of the job situation, position in society, and perceived social justice, including prompts with regard to the three facets of neoliberal individualism, instrumentality, and competition; and c) the political situation and perceived threats. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2022) relating to the dimensions of neoliberal ideology, and hermeneutic interpretation (Rennie, 2012) of underlying palliative or soothing psychological processes with regard to dissonant cognitions and epistemic and existential motives.

Table 4. Study Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Employment	Education / Training	Welfare	Interview
Anton (m)	25	Two casual jobs	Secondary middle school	Yes	online, 60 min.
Benjamin (m)	26	None	Warehouse worker	No	online, 50 min.
Christian (m)	22	None	Real estate clerk	Yes	online, 60 min.
Florian (m)	53	Part-time agency work	Construction worker	Yes	in-person, 55 min.
Dennis (m)	35	None > 1 year	Warehouse worker	Yes	online, 45 min.
Emil (m)	64	None > 1 year	Secondary basic school	Yes	in-person, 45 min.
Georg (m)	31	None > 1 year	Photographer	Yes	in-person, 55 min.
Heike (f)	57	None > 1 year	Physiotherapist	Yes	in-person, 60 min.
Ivan (m)	27	None > 1 year	Sales assistant	Yes	in-person, 60 min.

Source: Own research and elaboration.

4. Analysis

Results of the thematic analysis of transcribed interviews are organized around the theoretical dimensions of neoliberal ideological beliefs, that is, individualism, instrumentality, competition (Hornung et al., 2025a; 2025b). Each of these (deductive) dimensions is represented by one or more recurring (inductive) themes, illustrated by respective exemplary direct quotes. Internalized individualism was addressed in three themes, specifically, individualistic explanations for social disadvantage, meritocratic beliefs, and rejection of redistribution of income and wealth. As discussed below, internalized instrumentality was not further differentiated, resulting in a single theme. Internalized competition was represented by the three themes of introjected labor

market demands, internalized inferiority, and xenophobic scapegoating. After presenting these descriptive results, interpretative structural analyses regarding the palliative psychological functions of internalized neoliberal ideological beliefs are presented. Based on the contextual structure of the interviews, these hermeneutically derived psychological processes refer to the reduction of cognitive dissonance, the appeasement of epistemic needs for simplicity, order, control, predictability, and justice, and the management of existential threats, partly through xenophobic hybridization of neoliberal market ideology with nationalist and racist elements. Respective results are presented in the following sections.

4.1. Internalized individualism

Internalized forms of neoliberal individualism, based on notions of self-reliance and personal responsibility for one's own life situation, were prevalent in the interviews and were captured in three coding themes of individualistic explanations for social disadvantage, meritocratic beliefs, and rejection of redistribution of income and wealth (Cabanas, 2018; Greene, 2008; Liaquat et al., 2023). An overview of results pertaining to internalized individualism is provided in Table 5. Individualistic explanations for socio-economic disadvantage were operationalized as explicitly verbalized or more tacitly implied beliefs that failing to succeed in making an occupational career and resulting economic hardships are primarily attributable to an individual's inadequate performance or efforts (exemplary quote: "Many, of course, are simply lazy. They don't feel like working"). Concomitantly, meritocratic beliefs refer to explicit or implicit assumptions that wealth is based on hard work and that everyone can become economically successful regardless of their social background (exemplary quote: "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"). The final code of internalized individualism, rejection of redistribution of income and wealth, is anchored in the beliefs that wealthy people should not pay higher taxes and/or that social benefits should be restricted (exemplary quotes: "The consequence is that the rich leave the country and earn their money where they are left in peace"; and "I don't think you should be punished [if you are rich] by having to pay higher taxes"). Limiting of social welfare benefits is suggested specifically on the basis of nationality (exemplary quotes: "What politicians have spread around the world: 'Come to Germany, we'll take care of you all'. This harms the welfare state, because we can't take everyone in"). Notably, all study participants advocated individualistic positions to some degree. The first and third theme are taken up and continued in the section on internalized competition.

Table 5. Themes Relating to Internalized Individualism

Themes	Definitions	Exemplary Quotes
Individualistic explanations for social disadvantage	Explicit or implicit belief that occupational failure and economic hardship are due to an individual's inadequate performance	<p>Many, of course, are simply lazy. They don't feel like working. They complain: "They have so much money, why don't I have any money". And some people want more money, but they have to do something for it. (Georg)</p> <p>To be honest: I didn't try that hard at school. I didn't have any training for a while, so my chances of entering the job market were very poor. And I think I did that to myself. (Benjamin)</p>
Meritocratic beliefs	Explicit or implicit belief that wealth is based on hard work and that everyone can become wealthy regardless of their social background	<p>I do believe that even if you come from the lowest or poorest of backgrounds, you can make it. (Anton)</p> <p>People who make money at the top, start small in some garage and work their way up and then become bosses of Facebook and have money without end. They also invested a lot of money, time and energy to achieve this. So, I think anyone can do it. (Georg)</p>
Rejection of redistribution of income and wealth	Belief that wealthy people should not pay higher taxes and/or that social benefits should be restricted (especially to migrants)	<p>We live in capitalism, not communism, right. And then at some point it ends in expropriation. That is absolutely the wrong way. The consequence is that the rich then leave the country and earn their money where they are left in peace. (Benjamin)</p> <p>As a rule, you are rich if you work hard for it. In that case, I don't think you should be punished by having to pay higher taxes. The amount a rich person pays in taxes is already higher than a poor person. (Christian)</p> <p>What politicians have spread around the world: "Come to Germany, we'll take care of you all". This is harming the welfare state. Because we can't take everyone in. (Ivan)</p>

Source: Own research and elaboration.

4.2. Internalized Instrumentality

The second dimension of internalized instrumentality was defined in terms of explicitly stated or implied beliefs that employees should be first and foremost a means to the realize economic interests of employers (Edwards et al., 2003; Fowers, 2010; Zhang et al., 2025). This dimension was only represented in one code, which is displayed in Table 6 (exemplary quotes: “You don't go to work for them because you're such a great person! It's because they want to earn money from you, that's the way it is”; “Yes, the profit is simply greater if there are better social relationship at work”). However, this lack of differentiation must be interpreted in the context that the underlying conception of instrumentality was relatively narrow, referring only to employment relationships. Broader notions of endorsing or even demanding the instrumentality of humans for serving economic purposes were not included here. However, these become evident below with a xenophobic connotation regarding attitudes towards migrants as needing to contribute to the economy to be entitled to social benefits. Overall, the internalized postulate that people at work need to be economically useful to benefit their employers, was largely normalized and rarely challenged by study participants (LaMarre et al., 2019), manifesting in tendencies of instrumentalization and objectification of self and others.

Table 6. Themes Relating to Internalized Instrumentality

Themes	Definitions	Exemplary Quotes
Internalized instrumentality	Explicit or implicit beliefs that employees should be a means to realize economic interests	<p>Yes, that's quite normal. You don't go to work for them because you're such a great person. It's because they want to earn money from you. There's no other reason. He likes you because you bring him money, that's the way it is. You're not hired for any other reason. (Dennis)</p> <p>If your trainees and young employees feel that they are being listened to and that they are important, then the work ethic will be different. Yes, the profit is simply greater if there is better cooperation. (Christian)</p>

Source: Own research and elaboration.

4.3. *Internalized Competition*

The dimension of internalized competition (Becker et al., 2021; Hearn, 2021) was operationalized with three distinct codes, as displayed in Table 7. Introjected labor market demands refer to explicit or implicit beliefs of living in a competitive world and having to invest in one's human capital through formal qualifications and work experience to become employable (exemplary quotes: "Everyone has to have certain achievements, certain proof that they were diligent at school, that they once worked here and if you don't have these skills on paper, then things look very bad for you."). Building on individualistic explanations for social disadvantage, internalized inferiority showed in explicit or implicit beliefs of being an inferior member of society, including the outspoken or unconscious devaluation of one's own person and reference group (exemplary quotes: "My position is that I'm way down the food chain. Way down, of course. I know that"; and "My father was also a simple worker. My mother was also unemployed. Maybe that manifested itself in me").

The final code in the competition dimensions was termed xenophobic scapegoating, containing aspects of racialized competition and hostility in terms of othering and resentments against those seen as illegitimately appropriating resources, specifically referring, not to the rich, but to migrants and foreigners (exemplary quote: "She [German Chancellor] was only there for the refugees and forgot about the Germans. I can't take refugees in and leave the Germans in poverty!").

Overall, in conjunction with individualized responsibility and meritocratic attributions for success and failure as well as internalized necessity to be economically useful, logics of competition appeared highly salient and relevant for self-worth (LaMothe, 2017; Lazzarato, 2009). Moreover, clearly observable was the phenomenon of low in-group favoritism, denigrating people in socio-economically precarious situations, and high out-group favoritism, idealizing the rich and adopting their perspective and interests (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). An attempt to compensate this self-deprecation can be observed in xenophobic hostility and racialized competition, shifting in-group and out-group along the lines of national identity and nativism (Betz, 2019; Chang & Kang, 2018).

Such palliative psychological functions of identified internalized beliefs were examined in a subsequent step, based on structural interpretative analyses with regard to reduction of cognitive dissonance and creation of resonance with unfulfilled epistemic and existential motives for simplicity, structure, order, control, predictability, safety, and protection against perceived threats. These results are reported next.

Table 7. Themes Relating to Internalized Competition

Themes	Definitions	Exemplary Quotes
Introjected labor market demands	Explicit or implicit belief of living in a competitive world, having to invest in one's qualifications	<p>Everyone has to have certain achievements, proof that they were diligent at school, that they worked here and there. Depending on that, you get certain offers. And if you don't have these skills on paper, then things look very bad for you. (Benjamin)</p> <p>I didn't do the apprenticeship because it's such a great job, but for the qualification, I'd say. But it didn't do me any good either. (Dennis)</p>
Internalized inferiority	Explicit or implicit beliefs of being an inferior member of society; unconscious devaluation of one's own person	<p>My position is that I'm way down the food chain. Way down, of course. I know that. (Dennis)</p> <p>Sometimes when I meet people, well, I don't panic, but it just feels wrong to tell someone who is fully immersed in the world of work "yes, I'm unemployed". It makes you feel a bit looked down upon. (Christian)</p> <p>My father was also a simple worker. My mother was unemployed. Maybe that manifested itself in me through her, she didn't even get a vocational qualification and didn't do anything, because maybe that's what I was taught. (Ivan)</p>
Xenophobic scapegoating	Othering of those seen as illegitimately appropriating resources (especially "foreigners")	<p>She [German Chancellor] was only there for the refugees and forgot about the Germans. I can't take refugees in and leave the Germans in poverty! That was a huge mistake, what she did. (Heike)</p>

Source: Own research and elaboration.

4.4. Cognitive Dissonance

To explore psychological processes underlying the palliative functions of ideology, it was examined how neoliberal ideological beliefs are adopted and modified to obscure contradictions and reduce cognitive dissonance (Dusso, 2017; Jost,

Pelham et al., 2003). During the interviews, it was observed that participants' perceptions of social realities mismatched or conflicted with internalized ideologies, causing dissonant thoughts and inconsistent positions. Instead of reconsidering or discarding ideological convictions, these were adapted. In conjunction with a counterfactual distortion of reality, this served to "short-circuit" cognitive dissonance and sustain the respective ideological beliefs. Detailed in Table 8 are examples of the underlying negative dialectic processes. For instance, cognitive dissonance arose from conflicts between ideological rejection of redistribution of wealth and income and perceptions of social inequality and polarization in society (Liaquat et al., 2023). This contradiction was resolved through emphasizing the meritocratic conviction that wealth is based on hard work, legitimizing rejection of redistributive measures without denying the existence of social inequality (Hearn, 2021). Further, perceptions regarding structural barriers and discrimination often appeared incompatible with the ideological belief that, based on hard work, everyone can be successful. However, individualistic beliefs in self-reliance allowed acknowledging that structural stratification does exist, while also upholding that, ultimately, everyone is responsible for their own success and life situation, thus upholding the initial premise (Greene, 2008). Lastly, an ideological tendency of system justification clashed with experienced socio-economic disadvantage. In this context, internalized inferiority fulfilled a legitimizing function, postulating that personal circumstances are one's own fault due to lacking efforts and wrong decisions, which allowed upholding that the system is overall fair and legitimate, despite one's own disadvantage.

Table 8. Palliative Function of Reducing Cognitive Dissonance

Internalized Ideological Beliefs	Perception and Experienced Contradiction	Reduction of Cognitive Dissonance through Distortion of Perception and Modification of Ideological Beliefs
Ideological rejection of redistribution of wealth and income	Perception of social inequality and polarization in society	Meritocratic conviction that wealth is based on hard work legitimizes rejection of redistributive measures without denying existence of social inequality
Ideological belief that everyone can be successful	Observation and experience of structural barriers and discrimination	Individualistic beliefs in self-reliance allows acknowledging that structural barriers do exist, but ultimately everyone is responsible for their own life situation
Ideological tendency of system justification	Experienced personal socio-economic disadvantage	Internalized inferiority that personal circumstances are one's own fault due to low effort and wrong decisions allows upholding that the social system is legitimate and just, despite own disadvantage

Source: Own research and elaboration.

4.5. Epistemic Motives

Next, it was analyzed how neoliberal ideological beliefs allow respondents to maintain an understandable, uncomplicated and comforting worldview by appealing to epistemic motives, such as the need for simplicity, unambiguity, structure, order, certainty, predictability, control, and group identification (Hennes et al., 2012). Results are summarized in Table 9. For instance, individualistic explanations for socio-economic disadvantage allow attributing poverty and wealth solely to the achievements of individuals, while 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 exposure to adverse life situations suggest that these are individual problems that can be overcome by putting in more effort, making the social environment appear understandable and feeding an illusion of predictability and controllability (Rutjens & Loseman, 2010; Trevisan et al., 2022). Closely related to this individualistic rationalization, through the ideological lens of internalized inferiority, adverse life circumstances are seen as solely a consequence of one's own bad decisions, providing the impression of an orderly and structured world, where everyone gets what they deserve according to their efforts (Azevedo et al., 2019). Lastly, through internalized racialized competition and xenophobia, existing social inequalities and complex societal problems are projected onto immigrants and refugees, facilitating simple explanations related to a social structure and order, based on in-group and out-group thinking, distracting from the monopolization of societal wealth by powerful political-economic elites (Betz, 2019). Moreover, this racialized social structure also provides a way to support and stabilize a fragile and impaired sense of self-esteem and self-worth, based on a possibly subconsciously perceived lack of own economic instrumentality and contributions to society (Cichocka et al., 2022; LaMarre et al., 2019). This racist overcompensation becomes even more evident in the context of existential motives related to managing perceived threats and pressures, analyzed in the following section.

Table 9. Palliative Function of Appeasing Epistemic Motives

Internalized Ideological Beliefs	Psychological Processes and Functions of Neoliberal Ideology	Appeased Epistemic Motives
Individualistic explanations for socio-economic disadvantage	Poverty and wealth are attributed solely to the achievements of the individual, structural and social factors are neglected; complex societal problems are simplified, questions on social justice are avoided	Perceived simplicity and unambiguity
Meritocratic beliefs	Meritocratic explanation for social injustice and adverse life situations promises that these can be overcome by putting in more effort; social environment becomes understandable and predictable	Illusion of control and predictability
Internalized inferiority	Adverse life circumstances seen as direct consequence of one's own decisions; impression of an orderly and structured world where everyone gets what they deserve according to their efforts	Belief in a just world and system justification
Internalized xenophobic competition	Social inequalities and complex problems are projected onto immigrants and refugees; xenophobic attitudes facilitate simple explanations, structure and order based on in-group vs. out-group membership	Social structure and group-based order redeeming self-esteem

Source: Own research and elaboration.

4.6. Existential Motives

The previously mentioned aspect of in-group and out-group thinking and xenophobic stereotyping was explored more deeply with regard to existential motives of psychological safety, security, and identity protection (Biddlestone et al., 2025). All respondents perceived existential threats in terms of economic crisis and financial hardship, but also crime, terrorism, global wars, and domestic social tensions in the context of immigration (Rakowski et al., 2025). Against this background, an amalgamation or hybridization of neoliberal logics and racist sentiments was observed, described in Table 10 as xenophobic forms of individualism, xenophobic competition, and xenophobic instrumentality. It appears that psychodynamic processes of projection and displacement are at work here, scapegoating migrants and refugees, who are identified as the alleged cause of all of these perceived threats (Beller, 2023; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). Adopting anti-migrant attitudes seems to serve as a defense against experienced existential threats, aimed at restoring some extent of safety, security, and control (Rutjens & Loseman, 2010). The dimensions of neoliberal ideology played complementary roles here. Individualism manifested in beliefs that refugees are fully responsible

for their own fate and could have made it in their home countries if they had made more efforts and tried harder (exemplary quote: “If you just work hard enough, you can make it anywhere”). Notions of racialized competition were evident in beliefs that immigrants and refugees are appropriating (or are supplied with) resources, such as welfare, housing or jobs, that “belong” to the local population, who are the “losers” in a racialized economic contest (exemplary quote: “The migrants get everything, but what about the Germans?”). Lastly, instrumentality showed in the belief that refugees are not entitled to social services and benefits, because they have not sufficiently contributed to the prosperity of their host country, have not “achieved” enough (exemplary quote: “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. Rather than individual idiosyncrasies, results suggest a pattern of psychological functions fulfilled by these racists and nativist attitudes and beliefs in coping with and compensating socio-economic precarity and resulting threats to self-esteem, vulnerabilities, and internalized inferiority.

Table 10. Xenophobic Hybridization in Managing Existential Threats

Dimension	Xenophobic Individualism	Xenophobic Competition	Xenophobic Instrumentality
Background	Perceived existential threats: Economic downturn, social tensions, wars, and terrorism	Xenophobic projection and scapegoating: Identification of refugees as the alleged cause of perceived threats	Promise of safety and security: Anti-migrant attitudes and racism as defense against perceived threats
Definition	Belief that refugees are responsible for their own fate, that they would not have had to leave their home countries if they had made more efforts	Belief that refugees are taking resources from the local population (welfare, jobs), who are losing in economic and cultural competition	Belief that refugees are not entitled to benefits, because they have not contributed to the host economy, have not achieved enough
Exemplary quotes	If you just work hard enough, you can make it anywhere	The migrants get everything, but what about the Germans?	My parents built this country, but what have they contributed?

Source: Own research and elaboration.

5. Discussion

This study reported results of a qualitative investigation into the psychological internalization and functions of neoliberal ideology among socio-economically disadvantaged persons in precarious life situations and long-term unemployment. All of the nine interviewed participants to some extent either explicitly or implicitly indicated endorsement of neoliberal ideologies of individualism, instrumentality, and competition (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Höge et al., 2026; Hornung et al., 2025b). Among others, this manifested in verbalizing individualistic and meritocratic explanations for poverty and success and advocating for limiting redistribution of societal wealth. The latter demonstrates the contradictory and self-defeating character of false consciousness in opposing social change aimed at reducing inequality, although most respondents themselves received transfer income from the public welfare system (Jost, 1995; Jost, Pelham et al., 2003). The former confirms predictions regarding increased out-group and reduced in-group favoritism among the disadvantaged, portraying welfare recipients as lazy or morally inferior and elites as hard working and deserving (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Further, economic utility as a measure for human worth and dignity as well as the instrumentality of working people to generate profits for employers, were generally not called into question. On the contrary, participants had internalized labor market requirements and reproduced the neoliberal rhetoric of having to invest in one's human capital to improve one's employability (Bryan, 2023; Fleming, 2017; Howell et al., 2024). At the very same time, the prediction that disadvantaged groups would suffer from reduced self-esteem and self-worth as a consequence of system justification was vividly conformed in statements coded as internalized inferiority (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). It appears, however, that this negative self-image was partly compensated through othering and scapegoating migrants and construing a xenophobic narrative of social and economic competition (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). Linking one's own socio-economic precarity to the allegedly excessive financial support for foreigners could be seen as a way to restore self-esteem based on nationalistic identification and group-based entitlement.

Interpretative structural analyses confirmed palliative functions of neoliberal beliefs, which were flexibly adapted to reduce cognitive dissonance between perceived and experienced social injustice and contradictory ideological positions (Dusso, 2017; Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Specifically, individualistic and meritocratic beliefs served to resolve the contradiction between experienced own socio-economic disadvantage and observed societal polarization and the dogmatic rejection of the redistribution of wealth and income (Liaquat et al., 2023). Combined with the idealization of self-reliance and personal responsibility to overcome structural barriers, beliefs regarding the legitimacy and fairness of the political-economic system could be maintained (Cabanais, 2018; Edwards et al., 2003; Greene, 2008). Further, it was demonstrated, how individualistic

explanations for socio-economic disadvantage, meritocratic beliefs, internalized inferiority, and internalized xenophobic competition related to epistemic motives for simplicity, unambiguity, control and predictability, belief in a just world, and system justification as well as a group-based order suitable for redeeming a damaged sense of self-esteem and internalized inferiority (Hennes et al., 2012). This pattern became even more clear with regard to existential motives, where a hybridization of neoliberal and xenophobic themes was observed, such that migrants were held responsible for having to leave their countries of origin, framed as illegitimately appropriating resources, and not sufficiently contributing to the host economy (Beller, 2023; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019; Layton, 2014). Similar sentiments have been described in terms of economic nativism and welfare chauvinism (Betz, 2019). Remarkably, the three dimensions of neoliberal individualism, competition, and instrumentality were clearly discernable and loaded with nationalist and xenophobic connotations here.

While this qualitative study is limited with regard to a rather small and selective sample, its particular context allows illustrative insights into the psychological processes through which social inequality in neoliberal societies actually supports the dissemination of a “top-down” spiral of delusions, justifying and reproducing the system “bottom-up” through the cooptation of those who are most negatively affected (Jost et al., 2009; 2019). Overall, results support the conjecture that neoliberal ideology reproduces justifications for societal inequalities and social tensions particularly in the belief systems of those relatively deprived by the status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Pelham et al., 2003; Lima et al., 2005). Neoliberal beliefs manifested in adopting individualistic explanations for poverty and success, rejection of redistributive measures, and internalized representations of competition and inferiority (Girerd et al., 2021; 2023). Such self-deprecatory beliefs appeared instrumental for reducing cognitive dissonance, appeasing epistemic (structure, order, predictability) and existential (security, protection, agency) motives (Hennes et al., 2012). Protection from perceived threats was sought, specifically, in a toxic amalgamation of economic ideology with nationalist, proto-fascist themes of antagonistic in-group and out-group thinking. The resulting modified xenophobic neoliberal ideology appeared to serve psychological functions of restoring denied aspirations of superiority, upholding narratives of victimhood, and appeasing a frustrated sense of entitlement (Betz, 2019; Cichocka et al., 2022; Layton, 2014). However, another limitation that needs mentioning is the fact that, as the focus of this study was on the internalization of neoliberal ideological beliefs, instances of reluctance or resistance to adopt hegemonic interpretations that were sporadically observed, were not systematically coded and reported. At times, such differing views were expressed simultaneously with their incommensurate neoliberal counterparts, suggesting phenomena of “contradictory consciousness” (Purcell & Brook, 2022), deserving of future attention and research.

In the context of mounting risks and insecurity for the majority of the population, the notion of self-reinforcing hegemony means that, paradoxically, harms and threats may strengthen rather than challenge ideological deception and control, thus stabilizing the stratified system and its defense specifically among those most detrimentally impacted by its functioning (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Lima et al., 2025). Thus, escalating social, economic, and ecological crises may lead to more rather than less support for neoliberal ideology to subjectively reduce cognitive dissonance, uncertainty, disorder, and perceived threats. This conjecture corresponds with the finding that system-justification increases if the social system is perceived to be under threat, the so-called “rally-round-the flag effect” (Lambert et al., 2011). What might be called the social corrosiveness of false consciousness means that the adoption of neoliberal ideology undermines and erodes exactly those attitudes and behaviors that are important for the necessary socio-ecological transformation, such as prosocial solidarity, morality, and sufficiency (Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2020). Lastly, this research provides illustrative support for the previously observed authoritarian and xenophobic turn in neoliberalism (Biebricher, 2020; Bruff, 2014). Previously reported associations of free-market ideology with social dominance orientation and group-based enmity reveal an anti-humanist and crypto-fascist core of neoliberalism, which can also be observed in frequent references to social-Darwinist themes of competition as survival of the fittest (Radkiewicz & Skarżyńska, 2021). Far from a novel insight, this conjecture corresponds with convergence theory, which posits that capitalism, if not tamed and contained by social democracy, has an inherent tendency to gravitate towards authoritarian and fascist political systems (Palley, 2024; Patnaik, 2020; Pühringer & Ötsch, 2018). Shared features are the dehumanization of people without economic means or utility, merciless acceptance of inequality, concentration of power, and emphasis on competition, rivalry, and strife (Bettache et al., 2020; Goudarzi et al., 2022; LaMothe, 2017; Ötsch & Pühringer, 2017; Zhang et al., 2025). The history of neoliberalism attests to this heritage, which appears to remanifest today in the rise of right-wing populism and neo-fascist movements in economically developed societies rattled by a prolonged accumulation crisis of advanced neoliberal capitalism (Ayers, 2024; Milstein, 2021; Franz, 2021). The present study can make a contribution to better understanding the psychological processes underlying this disturbing trend of democratic deterioration and decivilization, even in states with established civil rights and comparatively robust welfare systems.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, confirming core assumptions of system justification theory, socio-economically disadvantaged groups internalize and advocate for neoliberal ideological themes that run counter to their social class interests (Jost & Hunyady,

2005), corresponding to what critical theory has identified as a false consciousness or a system of delusions (Eyerman, 1981; Jost, 1995; Stahl, 2024). 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). The psychological functions of neoliberal ideology include short-circuiting cognitive dissonance (Dusso, 2017), rationalizing perceived and experienced social inequalities and injustices (Goudarzi et al., 2022; Liaquat et al., 2023), and thus bolstering the legitimacy of and satisfaction with the status quo (Lima et al., 2025). 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 socio-economic and socio-political threats, especially in conjunction with nationalist and xenophobic elements (Chang & Kang, 2018; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). This connection of neoliberal ideology with group-based enmity and xenophobic stereotypes was an emerging and recurring theme. Perceived existential threats were projected onto immigrants, scapegoated for not taking responsibility, illegitimately appropriating resources, and insufficiently contributing to the host economy (Betz, 2019). 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- or proto-fascist themes provides an explanation for the widespread rise of right-wing populism in advanced neoliberal societies (Micocci & Di Mario, 2017; Palley, 2024; Pühringer & Ötsch, 2018). Despite the problematic psychological processes uncovered here, it seems important to refrain from being either judgmental or apologetic of study participants, for whom the internalization of neoliberal beliefs along with xenophobic attitudes partly appear to be a way of coping with their own precarity and (self-)stigmatization (Betz, 2019; Franz, 2021; Stahl, 2024). The socio-economically disadvantaged, thus, are as much perpetrators of prejudice and xenophobia as they are victims of their own false consciousness (Eyerman, 1981; Jost, 1995). The request for them to overcome their delusions, thus implies the demand for dignified social and material living conditions that do not necessitate such numbing misbeliefs and societal structures that do not reinforce them.

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