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The Corrosive Psychology of Neoliberal Ideology in Current Socio-Ecological Crises

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Abstract

Neoliberal ideology has attained political-economic as well as psycho-social hegemony. Its political, social, and fantasmatic logics pervade societal institutions, work organizations, and psychological representations. Building on associated critical theorizing, a three-dimensional conceptualization underlies the neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire (NLI). The three dimensions operationalize (8 items each) political-economic attitudes of a) individualism (self-reliance and self-interest), b) competitiveness (need to dominate and outperform), and c) instrumentality (economic value as reflecting human worth). Extending preceding research, findings from three studies relevant to social and ecological crises are presented. The first two are quantitative. Study 1 examines relationships between NLI, system justification, climate-protective behavior, and self-estimated carbon footprint (N = 344), controlling for demographic variables and environmental attitudes. Neoliberal ideologies act as system-justifying beliefs detrimental to climate-protective behavior, which (along with income) determines carbon footprint. Study 2 reports relationships between NLI, moral disengagement, and political activism concerning refugees and migration in an independent sample (N = 276). Controlling for demographic variables, moral disengagement mediates the negative relationship between NLI and prosocial engagement (distributing materials, signing petitions, discussions, protests). Study 3 qualitatively investigates neoliberal ideologies among economically disadvantaged groups. Interviews with (N = 9) individuals in precarious life situations and long-term unemployment, confirm that respondents aggressively support neoliberal ideologies contradicting their social interests. This includes individualistic explanations for poverty and success, rejection of wealth redistribution, and internalized inferiority. Reduction of cognitive dissonance, epistemic and existential motives (order, security) reinforce this self-marginalizing consciousness. Psychodynamic functions and implications of neoliberal ideologies in escalating socio-ecological crises are discussed.

Keywords: Neoliberal ideology, system justification, environmental behavior, political activism, socio-ecological crises