

# Ideology and intergroup inequality: emerging directions and trends

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The authors propose that two guiding frameworks characterize psychological research on the relation between ideology and inequality. The first, called the *product approach*, focuses on ideologies directly concerned with intergroup relations, in which beliefs about inequality can be considered a *direct product* of the relevant belief system. These ideologies focus on topics that are clearly and explicitly connected to inequality, such as hierarchy, dominance, the supremacy of the ingroup, or beliefs about the optimal social and/or economic order. The second approach focuses on the ways in which perceptions of inequality can be a *byproduct* of ideologies or worldviews that are not directly concerned with inequality, but can impact intergroup relations nonetheless. These ideologies tend to involve more abstract, epistemic content that can be applied broadly, but often manifest in beliefs that are relevant to intergroup relations and inequality. Examples are used to illustrate this distinction, and emerging areas are discussed.

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The gap between the rich and poor continues to widen in nearly all industrialized nations. As politicians, media outlets, and the general public wrestle with the social, economic, and political implications of this widening gap, many academic psychologists have begun to offer a social scientific point of view. Psychologists, in particular, are actively engaged in this pursuit, researching and theorizing about the social and psychological factors that can make people think inequality is more or less legitimate or more or less desirable or undesirable. As the same time, the social scientific study of ideology—defined here as a set of beliefs or worldviews, whether social, political, or religious, regarding how the social world is and/or should be arranged—has seen a tremendous resurgence of late

[1,2]. Not surprisingly, theories of ideology and worldview maintenance have played a big part in our understanding of how ideology, and the psychological processes of ideological- or worldview-maintenance, impact attitudes and behaviors relevant to social inequality.

While there is a relatively rich history of personality and social psychologists applying theories of ideology to understand particular aspects of intergroup relations and intergroup inequality [3–6], the past two and half decades have seen a number of new approaches emerge [7–9]. Our goal here is to attempt to offer some organization and direction to understanding the connections between inequality, intergroup relations, and ideology. We will not review all of (or even most of) the various, relevant theories or empirical evidence relevant, but we will instead focus on a few notable examples that help us most clearly organize this literature.

## The product vs byproduct distinction

We do so by suggesting it has unfolded in two distinct approaches, the product and the byproduct approaches. The first generally focuses on ideologies directly concerned with intergroup relations, in which beliefs about inequality can be thought of as *direct product* of the relevant belief system. These ideologies focus on topics that are clearly and explicitly connected to inequality, such as hierarchy, dominance, the supremacy of the ingroup, or beliefs about the optimal social and/or economic order. Examples include research on social dominance orientation, authoritarianism, free-market conservatism, and generalized prejudice. The second approach focuses on the ways in which beliefs about inequality can be a *byproduct* of ideologies or worldviews that are not directly concerned with intergroup relations, but can ultimately impact intergroup relations nonetheless. These ideologies tend to involve more abstract, epistemic content that can be applied broadly, but often manifest in beliefs that are relevant to intergroup relations generally and inequality specifically. Examples include system justification theory, just world theory, and compensatory control theory.

While it is certainly the case that not all relevant theories or approaches will fit neatly into one of these two buckets (indeed, some may have aspects of each), we do suggest that the straightforward organizing principle we put forth below offers a useful means for thinking about the state of this fast developing field. Next, we offer some illustrative examples of each, and note recent areas of interest, controversy, or excitement wherever possible.

### **Ideology and inequality: examples of the product approach**

Social psychologists focused on ideologies directly connected to beliefs about intergroup relations have noted a couple different ways in which these ideologies can translate into beliefs and preferences relevant to inequality. On the one hand, inequality is maintained by the derogation, discrimination, and marginalization of low status and low power groups, while at the same time supporting and admiring groups with higher status and power [9]. One ideology within this cluster is social dominance orientation, a belief system which measures explicit beliefs about the desirability of unequal intergroup inequality and that is associated with prejudice and dehumanization of low status groups [10–12]. These effects might operate via perceived threat to the status hierarchy [13] and via differences in the amount of perceived inequality in the society [14<sup>•</sup>]. More recent work finds that generalized prejudice, a cluster of negative attitudes toward societal groups, is typically directed toward low status groups, even if one is a member of that group (Bergh et al., in press).

On the other hand, inequality can be maintained—especially in already unequal contexts — by ideologies that involve the explicit endorsement of traditions and conventions of intergroup relations that serve to make social mobility unlikely, in part by derogating those groups that traverse social norms [15]. For example, authoritarianism is directed toward protecting group norms and punishing norm violators [15], as well as prejudice toward unconventional groups paired with liking for conventional groups [10,11]. Similar results have been found with religious fundamentalism [16<sup>•</sup>], suggesting that these findings are not limited to political ideologies.

A major, unresolved question is the degree to which the psychological processes underlying prejudice and support for inequality are different between different ideological groups. For example, some perspectives emphasize the ideological differences in cognitive abilities, processing styles, and motivations and how these cognitive and motivational differences account for ideological differences in prejudice [17<sup>•</sup>,18]. These perspectives are consistent with findings linking conservative and traditional ideologies to lower cognitive ability and more rigid and closed-minded cognitive styles and these cognitive styles to prejudice [18–20], as well as more sophisticated analyses of cognitive processes, such as the categorization of racially ambiguous faces as Black or White [21]. Other recent work has demonstrated how needs for certainty [22<sup>•</sup>] and the reliance on abstract fairness principles [23] can explain the link from conservatism to the derogation and unequal treatment of non-normative groups.

Other perspectives suggest that the underlying psychological processes of prejudice are highly similar across

ideologies and that the key differences are in the content of prejudices. For example, although conservatives express prejudice toward unconventional groups compared to conventional groups, liberals/progressives express prejudice toward conventional groups compared to unconventional [11,24<sup>•</sup>]. The finding that the expression of prejudice is a mirror image at both ends of an ideological continuum suggests that the underlying psychological process—prejudice toward people with differing values and goals—may be similar across ideological beliefs [25]. Prejudice toward low status and unconventional groups helps people with inequality and tradition maintaining ideologies fulfill their values and goals.

These two approaches to understanding the connection between ideologies and intergroup inequality are typically thought to conflict, but that does not need to be the case. One option for integrating the two approaches is to think about the approaches as answering two different questions. The process-differences approach is aimed at discovering why people adopt ideologies with specific content (e.g. progressive or conservative beliefs), whereas the content-differences approach is focused on the downstream effects of the content after it is adopted.

### **Ideology and inequality: examples of the byproduct approach**

An alternative approach to understanding the link between ideology and beliefs about inequality focuses on ideologies and worldviews that on the surface seem unrelated to inequality or intergroup relations, but tend to result in social beliefs and perceptions that are directly relevant. Most of these programs of research identify a particular epistemic ideological position that is not specific to politics or intergroup relations but is often manifest in those domains, making beliefs about inequality a byproduct of the particular ideology.

Perhaps the most well-researched examples are those concerned with the belief in a just world [26]. According to this perspective, to develop the necessary capacities to engage in long-term goal pursuit and the delay of gratification, children develop a belief that the world is ultimately a just and fair place, one in which rewards and punishments are distributed according to the principle of deservingness. As a result, when people learn about others that are wealthy or poor, or socially advantaged or disadvantaged, they tend to explain this as fair, insofar as it is somehow deserved: The poor as unintelligent or lazy, the rich as intelligent or hardworking [27]. Thus, in this case, people's ideological belief about fairness and deservingness, which itself is thought to be rooted in processes of self-regulation [28], can manifest in the beliefs people hold regarding the causes of social inequality. The theory also suggests that when people confront something that could potentially threaten their belief in a just world, such as blatant inequality or social disadvantage, they will

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