

Topic Page: [Ideology](#)

Definition: **ideology** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Collection of beliefs or ideas reflecting the interests and aspirations of a country or its political system. In the 20th century, the term has been applied to various political theories, including fascism, Marxism, and communism.

Summary Article: **Ideology**

From *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*

Ideology is a term widely used in everyday language, in philosophy and literature, and in the social sciences. It is well represented in research in political psychology, and more recently it has attracted attention in social psychology. Definitions of the concept vary considerably. A common theme in the research literature is that an *ideology* is a set of beliefs, shared by members of a group or collective movement, organized into a doctrine that guides thinking and behavior. In social psychology, the term refers to a systematic and integrated set of beliefs whose primary function is explanation. This explanatory function of ideology links the concept to social psychological theories of how people attribute causes to behavior. An ideology circumscribes thinking and entails commitment; hence an adherent will usually find it difficult to escape its grip. Literature dealing with ideology is mainly in the arena of politics, where discussion of ideology usually includes reference to social or political plans and means of putting these plans into action. This entry looks at characteristics of ideology, reviews its expression in politics, and discusses its importance.

Features of an Ideology

As commonly employed in social psychology, the concept of ideology is connected to discussion of the process of *attribution*, since both are forms of social knowledge and knowledge construction. This connection is clearest in the case of *societal attributions*, the explanations that people give for large-scale social phenomena. Such attributions are located within and shaped by wider, socially constructed belief systems. For example, explanations for poverty can be subject to attributional bias: Both the rich and the poor tend to explain poverty in terms of the way poor people behave rather than in terms of wider economic forces.

There is some overlap between the terms *ideology* and *value*. Both are used in social psychology to denote a higher order concept that provides a hierarchical structure for organizing attitudes. In Norman Feather's view, a value consists of a set of beliefs about desirable behavior and goals, and these beliefs have an "oughtness" or prescriptive quality to them. A value transcends attitudes, and it influences the form that attitudes take. This is partly echoed by Alice Eagly and Shelly Chaiken when they describe an ideology as a cluster of attitudes and beliefs that are interdependent. They add that an ideology is formed around a dominant societal theme. John Jost and his colleagues also emphasize the fact that an ideology is a belief system that is shared by members of a specific group, class, or community. It is also possible that not only beliefs and attitudes but also values can be subsumed by an ideology.

The important influences on the way a person acquires knowledge of the content of an ideology are the same as those that help shape a person's attitudes and values: parents, peer groups, and major

reference groups (such as ethnic and religious groups). Although an ideology provides an overarching structure, not all of its detailed content is required before a person has some ideological understanding and commitment.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of ideologies is that their very existence invites confrontation. If an ideology defines an organized body of beliefs (and attitudes and values) held by its adherents, the chances are great that there will be other available ideologies that are different from and even opposed to it. If an ideology represents a guiding doctrine for one group, then a different group with a different ideology can be a sufficient condition for intergroup conflict. Indeed, we are very familiar with the political and religious ideologies that serve as rallying points for many of the world's most intransigent factional and international clashes.

Ideologies and Politics

An early political ideology was Machiavellianism, named after Niccolò Machiavelli, a 16th-century Florentine diplomat considered by some to have been the first social scientist. Machiavellianism is the notion that craft and deceit are justified in pursuing and maintaining power in the political world. The term itself was first used by Destutt de Tracy at the time of the French Revolution and meant “the science of ideas.”

The conceptualization of ideology was developed further by the political philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and acquired the connotation of a social structure that enabled a group with power to retain control with the least amount of resistance. According to Marx, an ideology suggests a world system that is in accord with the nature of things. It should be seen as an example of progress, unfolding from history and having the prospect of eternity. The Marxian view is that for an anticapitalist revolution to be successful, people need to understand that the ruling class has an ideology based on domination over subordinate classes. Thus the key to the success of the ruling class prior to the Russian Revolution was that its members had found ways to legitimize the social order.

How is an ideology constructed? This question has been addressed differently by political scientists and by social psychologists. According to John Jost and his colleagues, political scientists argue for top-down processing, in which political attitudes are acquired through exposure to ideological clusters that are established by political elites. Social psychologists point to bottom-up processing, in which people's psychological needs and motives make them receptive to particular ideological positions. In both approaches, an ideology requires that people are taught how to think and how to act and to accept where they fit into society; in other words, the populace is reprogrammed. Historical examples of mass political education abound. In the 20th century, anti-Semitism was carefully articulated during the rise of Nazism, and Mao Zedong orchestrated a “reeducation” of the populace to provide the basis of his cultural revolution. From the perspectives of social, personality, and political psychology, there have been three areas of intensive research. The earliest of these was research on authoritarianism. Two modern conceptual developments are social dominance theory and systems justification theory.

The Authoritarian Personality

In their work *The Authoritarian Personality* published in 1950, Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, and their colleagues described what they believed to be a personality syndrome that predisposed certain people to be authoritarian. The historical context for this theory was the role of fascist ideology in the Holocaust—Adorno and Frenkel-Brunswik were both Jewish and had fled Hitler's regime (in Germany and Austria, respectively). The theory proposed that autocratic and punitive childrearing

practices were responsible for the emergence in adulthood of various clusters of beliefs. These included: ethnocentrism; an intolerance of Jews, Blacks, and other ethnic and religious minorities; a pessimistic and cynical view of human nature; conservative political and economic attitudes; and a suspicion of democracy.

With the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno reported that his group had constructed an instrument known as the California F-scale, intended at first to assess tendencies toward fascism, it was eventually purported as a measure of general authoritarianism. Despite substantial methodological and conceptual flaws, this work stimulated huge research interest in the 1960s and beyond. In later years, Robert Altemeyer developed a more restricted but better designed and more useful measure of right wing authoritarianism.

Social Dominance Theory

According to this theory, developed by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, societies are generally structured as group-based hierarchies, in which dominant groups have higher social status, and more political authority, power, and wealth. Justification for the social structure incorporates myths and attitudes, fosters particular values, and is elaborated in an ideology that enhances hierarchical social relations and maintains prejudice. A dominant group, such as the rich, is disproportionately advantaged (e.g., by the status or power of its members), whereas subordinate groups, such as the poor, are disproportionately disadvantaged (e.g., by lack of access to health care). A society's institutions can enhance the existing hierarchy. For example, the criminal justice system may be biased toward harsher penalties for members of socially disadvantaged minority groups.

Social dominance theory also accounts for variation between individuals in the extent to which they accept societal ideologies that legitimize hierarchy and discrimination, on one hand, versus equality and fairness on the other. The underlying motivation is a view of intergroup relations that is exploitative and power based. People who want their own group to be dominant and superior to relevant outgroups have a high *social dominance orientation* (SDO). This encourages them to reject egalitarian ideologies. People with a high SDO are more inclined to be prejudiced than people with a low SDO. The SDO construct is correlated with measures such as ethnocentrism, nationalism, authoritarianism, racism, and sexism; with behaviors such as racial discrimination and the stereotyping of minorities; and with social policies such as death penalty views, welfare reform views, and support for military conquest.

The theory as originally framed was about the desire for the ingroup to be in command—to rule and govern outgroups. Recently, however, social dominance theory has been extended to account for a more general desire of group members for unequal relations between groups, irrespective of whether members' own group is at the top or the bottom of the status hierarchy. In other words, both dominant and subordinate groups are parties to subordination. The ideologies adopted justify on moral and intellectual grounds the customs and conventions that determine what is valued in a society. This extension makes social dominance theory look more like system justification theory.

System Justification Theory

According to John Jost and his colleagues, most political ideologies are located on a left-right dimension, with the two poles also often called *liberal*, which calls for social change and rejects social inequality, and *conservative*, which resists social change and endorses social inequality. The basis of a particular political ideology rests on the differences in thinking and motivation that go with being either a liberal or a conservative. Liberals prefer progress, rebelliousness, chaos, flexibility, feminism, and

equality; conservatives prefer conformity, order, stability, traditional values, and hierarchy.

Consequently, system justification is more common among conservatives than among liberals. Conservatives justify and protect the existing social system—the status quo—even if this means upholding an unfavorable position for their own group. There is an irony here. Why protect such an ideology when it maintains their position of disadvantage? Jost has suggested that one motivation for this may be to reduce uncertainty—better to live in reduced circumstances and be certain of one's place than to challenge the status quo and face an uncertain future.

Are Ideologies Important?

Ideologies certainly are crucially important—they frame polarized worldviews and can be the source of intergroup behaviors that are highly conflictual. For example, the cold war spanned almost half a century—a period in which the world was balanced precariously, caught between two diametrically opposed ideologies. Their adherents possessed an arsenal of nuclear weapons capable of destroying life on this planet. One espoused Marxism-Leninism and the other described itself as “the free world.”

More recently an old ideological difference between Eastern Islam and primarily Western Christianity has joined the mix to split the globe in different ways. The “Threat to the West” now extends to China and various “terrorist” nations in the Middle East, whose lethal power is measured in a nuclear currency. As Philip Tetlock has noted, the older bipolar world has evolved quickly into one that is multipolar. It is unlikely that these various nations can be nicely aligned as units on a left-right political continuum. It is more likely that hawks (conservatives) and doves (liberals) will be found in each. The future of humankind is in the hands of policymakers whose judgments are affected by their ideological commitments.

See also

Attribution Biases, Authoritarian Personality, Dogmatism, Nationalism and Patriotism, Norms, Power, Protestant Work Ethic, Right Wing Authoritarianism, Social Dominance Theory, System Justification Theory

Further Readings

- Bluhm, W. T. (1974). *Ideologies and attitudes: Modern political culture*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Eagly, A. H., & Chaiken, S. (1998). Attitude structure and function. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 269-322). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Jost, J.; Federico, C. M.; Napier, J. L. Political ideology: Its structure, functions, and elective affinities. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60 : 307-337., 2009.
- Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tetlock, P. E. (1998). Social psychology and world politics. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 868-912). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Vaughan, Graham M.

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Vaughan, G. M., & Vaughan. (2009). Ideology. In J. M. Levine, & M. A. Hogg (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of group processes and intergroup relations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/ideology>

 Copyright © 2010 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

 Copyright © 2010 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

APA

Vaughan, G. M., & Vaughan. (2009). Ideology. In J. M. Levine, & M. A. Hogg (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of group processes and intergroup relations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/ideology>

Chicago

Vaughan, Graham M., and Vaughan. "Ideology." In *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, edited by John M. Levine, and Michael A. Hogg. Sage Publications, 2009. <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/ideology>

Harvard

Vaughan, G.M. and Vaughan. (2009). Ideology. In J.M. Levine & M.A. Hogg (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of group processes and intergroup relations*. [Online]. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available from: <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/ideology> [Accessed 18 September 2019].

MLA

Vaughan, Graham M., and Vaughan. "Ideology." *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, edited by John M. Levine, and Michael A. Hogg, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2009. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/ideology>. Accessed 18 Sep. 2019.