

# Encyclopedia of Social Psychology

## False Consciousness

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## Definition

False consciousness is defined as the holding of false or inaccurate beliefs that are contrary to one's objective social interests and that contribute to the maintenance of oppression or unjust inequality in society. According to this usage, the disadvantaged (e.g., poor people, the working class, women, and oppressed minorities) possess false consciousness when they genuinely come to believe that they are inferior, deserving of their subordinate role in the social hierarchy, or entirely incapable of taking action against the causes of their misery. Members of advantaged groups are said to possess false consciousness when they genuinely come to believe that they are superior, deserving of their privileged role in the hierarchy, or that what is good for them is good for everyone. Extensive sociological and psychological evidence reveals that people often do hold seemingly false beliefs that justify and perpetuate their own (and others') misfortune and oppression.

## Historical Background

The concept of false consciousness originates with the early writings of Karl Marx, although it was his collaborator, Friedrich Engels, who coined the term. Marx emphasized the illusory character of ideology and the way in which ideology functions to obscure and to justify oppression and dominance in capitalist societies. Through institutional control over religion, education, culture, the media, and political and economic institutions, dominant elites in society were seen as capable of spreading ideas and values that served their own narrow interests and perpetuated their hegemony. Thus, according to Marx and Engels, the political consciousness of most members of the working class was theorized to be “false,” in the sense that it reflected the dominant group's biased interests rather than their own. At the same time, Marx believed optimistically that the oppressed would eventually recognize the falseness of prevailing ideas and take action against the sources of their oppression.

# Social Psychological Research on False Consciousness

Contemporary scholars, influenced by Marxian ideas in sociology, have suggested that Marx may have underestimated the extent to which psychological processes play a role in leading people to accept, rationalize, and adapt to unjust circumstances. An extensive body of research in social psychology has demonstrated that members of disadvantaged (as well as advantaged) groups often engage in defensive bolstering of the status quo (i.e., system justification). In so doing, they appear to actively imbue the existing social order with legitimacy and stability. At least six types of false consciousness beliefs have been identified by scholars and researchers:

- 1. Denial and failure to perceive injustice and disadvantage
- 2. Fatalism, or the belief that protest is futile and social change is impossible to achieve
- 3. Rationalization of unequal distributions of social roles and divisions of labor in society with the use of stereotypes and other social judgments
- 4. The tendency to falsely blame victims for their own misfortune or to otherwise deflect blame for human suffering away from the social system itself
- 5. Identification with and idealization of “the oppressor,” or the tendency to harbor preferences in favor of members of dominant groups
- 6. Active resistance to social change and the desire to stick with the status quo even when new alternatives would produce better outcomes

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See also

- [Ideology](#)
- [Just-World Hypothesis](#)
- [System Justification](#)

### Further Readings

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