Ideology

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Introduction

Ideology is a complex phenomenon that requires a multidisciplinary approach. As systems of belief, ideologies are a form of social cognition and hence need to be studied in (social) psychological terms. As developed and used by social groups, they need to be accounted for in a sociological and politicological framework. And acquired, (re)produced, and communicated by situated text and talk, they need a discourse-analytical and communicational approach. Such a multidisciplinary theory goes beyond traditional philosophical views of ideology as a form of false consciousness. This entry summarizes such a multidisciplinary theory of ideology, with special attention to the relations between ideology and communication (for detail of the theory summarized here, see Van Dijk, 1998).

Another fundamental difference from most classical approaches is that ideologies are not necessarily negative. They are not only developed and used to sustain and legitimate social and political power abuse, as is the case for racism, but can also be shared and used by social groups to resist such domination and in order to propagate egalitarian attitudes and practices, as is the case for feminism. In both cases, ideologies are belief systems shared by groups in order to promote their interests and to guide their social and political practices.

Ideology as social cognition

Whatever else ideologies may be or do, they are first of all a kind of belief, that is, they are mental representations, as is also the case for forms of social cognition such as knowledge, opinions, attitudes, norms, and values. But unlike personal opinions they are essentially shared by social collectivities. They are a form of shared or "widespread" ideas (Fraser & Gaskell, 1990). There are no such things as personal ideologies, in the same way as there are no personal languages. Even when the original "ideas" that give rise to an ideology have been developed by one or a few individuals, these ideas only constitute an ideology as defined here when groups of people acquire, share, propagate, and use them to promote their collective interests and to guide their social practices.

Yet, as is the case for languages, ideologies may be learned and used by individuals as group members in their everyday practices—thus bridging the well-known gap between social structure and individual agency. This also guarantees that ideologies can be (slowly) changed and adapted to new social and political situations.

As socially shared systems of ideas, ideologies are part of a very complex network of neurologically based mental representations stored in the (so-called "semantic") long-term memory. As is the case for the socioculturally shared knowledge of communities, they are slowly acquired and relatively stable in order to serve as a fundamental cognitive basis for the everyday social conduct and discourse of group members. One does not become a racist or feminist overnight, nor an antiracist or an antifeminist for that matter.

Although, since the 1980s, there have been a large number of studies on various forms of social cognition in social psychology (for an introduction and review see, e.g., Augoustinos, Walker, & Donoghue, 2006; Fiske & Taylor, 1991), sociocognitive studies of ideology have been rare.

Ideologies as polarized self-schemas of a group

Although at present the detailed cognitive organization (as well as the neurological basis) of ideologies is still unknown, ideologically based discourse and other social practices provide some indirect insight into these underlying mental structures.

In order to serve the interests of a social group, ideologies must represent the very "definition" of the group, so that group members can identify themselves as group members in the first place. Thus, ideologies typically represent who we are, what we do, why we do it, how we (should or should not) do it, and what we do it for, that is, our social identity, actions, goals, norms and values, resources, and interests. In that respect, ideologies are the collective, basic mental self-schema of a group consisting of information organized by these schematic categories. Often this self-schema is positively biased—although some (dominated) groups in a specific sociopolitical environment may have a negative self-schema (for details, see Van Dijk, 1998)

Secondly, most group ideologies are developed and used in relation to other social groups, for example whether to compete with, dominate, resist, or otherwise interact with other groups and their members. This is only possible when group members not only have an ideological self-schema, but also need to form a schematic representation of relevant other groups, as is the case for racists with regard to ethnically different immigrants or minorities, and feminists with regard to sexist men. This other-representation is usually negatively biased. In other words, ideologies tend to be polarized between *Us* and *Them*, between ingroups and outgroups (for intergroup relations, see Tajfel, 1982).

Unlike socially shared knowledge of communities, group ideologies are at least partly evaluative, as is shown in their positive ingroup and negative outgroup bias, and as defined by the norms and values of a group and its surrounding society and culture. Thus, a positive socioculturally shared value such as freedom may be construed in different ideologies in order to serve particular group interests, as is the case with the freedom of the market, the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, and academic freedom, on the one hand, and freedom from oppression, discrimination, or pollution, on the other.

As socially shared mental self-schemas, ideologies must be quite general and abstract, because they need to be relevant for many different people, circumstances, experiences,

and social practices and in many different situations during a relatively long period, so as to be able to maintain the identity and serve the interest of a group. In that sense they represent general principles and guidelines rather than detailed instructions or opinions on specific issues.

Ideologies and social attitudes

In order to be able to serve as guidelines for everyday practices of group members, ideologies are assumed to found and organize more specific, socially shared representations, traditionally known as attitudes. Thus, group members may have stereotypes, prejudices, or other generic attitudes on government intervention in the market, on immigration, abortion, homosexual marriage, the death penalty, or minority quotas, among many other issues.

Although also the detailed structure of such attitudes has hardly been studied, despite a long tradition of attitude research in social psychology (see, e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), their ideological basis and manifestations in discourse and social practices suggest that they also tend to be polarized, for example between pro-choice and pro-life views of abortion, as well as the positive representation of the views and conduct of the ingroup, and a negative one of the outgroup. Whereas ideologies may define the general coherence of various attitudes of a group, attitudes themselves are more specific and tend to influence our discourse and other social practices as group members more directly. This also means that we usually acquire specific attitudes first, and only later acquire a more fundamental ideological framework for them. Thus, women may develop a critical attitude toward sexual harassment, and only later acquire a more general feminist ideology in order to resist other forms of male domination.

Ideological mental models

For ideologies to develop as the basis of shared experiences, and to act as guidelines of the daily practices of group members, they obviously need to be related to the opinions and activities of individual group members. To thus relate social structure and individual agency, we use the fundamental cognitive notion of mental models. Models are defined as embodied, subjective mental representations of personal experiences, actions, and situations, and are represented in the episodic (autobiographical) memory part of long-term memory (Johnson-Laird, 1983; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1993). In order to represent social situations and their environment or personal experiences, to plan and execute specific actions, and to understand or coordinate with other ingroup or outgroup members, people form such subjective mental models on an ongoing basis.

These models, on the one hand, are construed by instantiations or applications of socially shared knowledge in the community (e.g., on immigration); on the other hand they may be influenced by the socially shared attitudes and ideologies of the ingroup. But as personal mental models they are not merely instantiations of socially shared beliefs, but also may be influenced by earlier or current *personal* experiences, that is, old models, which may even be at variance with shared experiences of a group.

Thus, the mental models construed by group members (as group members) are the ways in which ideologies are "lived" in the everyday experience of group members, and explain why and how ideologies may show considerable personal variation, uses, and manifestations. Based on socially shared attitudes, mental models thus feature personally variable opinions on specific events. These mental models of personal experiences are also the source of possible changes in ideology, for instance as new circumstances may lead to different personal experiences shared by an increasing number of group members—as we know from the historical development of racism, pacifism, or feminism.

Models are subjective mental representations of specific events and situations and share a fundamental cognitive schema defining all human experiences, organized by such basic categories as setting (time, place), participants (and their identities, roles, and relationships), ongoing events, actions, or situations, and goals. Such mental models serve not only to represent past actions but also to control ongoing conduct and to plan future actions of group members.

We can see that the combined social and personal influences on the mental models of everyday experiences and practices define these mental models as the ideal interface between social structure and individual agency. Thus, ideologically based mental models allow people to understand and act as group members and in the interests of a group. This also means that they serve as the basis for discourse and communication as ideological practices of groups and their members.

Ideological discourse and communication

Ideologies are not innate but learned. As briefly indicated above, they are gradually acquired by people as members of social groups, mediated by personal experiences (subjective mental models) instantiated by, or generalized as, socially shared attitudes about relevant social or political issues. For such social attitudes and their underlying ideologies to be acquired and shared in a group in the first place, they usually need to be expressed, formulated, or otherwise communicated among group members or defended or legitimated outside of the group. That is, ideologies are typically produced and reproduced by talk or text by ideological discourse, such as party programs, parliamentary debates, news reports and editorials, textbooks, bibles, pamphlets, or scientific articles, as well as everyday conversations among or with people as group members (Van Dijk, 1998, 2008b).

Ideological discourse structures

Ideological discourse is not shaped arbitrarily. In order to function as a persuasive expression and reproduction of group attitudes and ideologies, some discourse structures are more typical or efficient than others. Thus, one of the most typical and general properties of ideological discourse is its polarized nature, reflecting the underlying polarized structure of social attitudes and ideologies, that is, a polarization between

(positive) *Us* and (negative) *Them.* Indeed, these very pronouns are the prototypical grammatical markers of underlying ideologies.

This polarization may affect all variable structures at all levels of discourse and its communicative contexts, such as

- who has the floor in a debate or conversation
- who has active or passive access to public discourse
- overall discourse topics
- descriptions of people and their actions and properties
- lexical items (words)
- metaphors
- implications and presuppositions
- arguments
- narrative structures
- rhetorical operations ("figures"), such as hyperboles and euphemisms
- images and photos

and so on.

This discursive polarization is typically characterized by enhancing the positive properties of *Us*, the ingroup, and the negative properties of *Them*, the outgroup. At the same time, the negative properties of the ingroup and the positive ones of the outgroup are typically de-emphasized, toned down, mitigated, or simply ignored or hidden. We thus obtain an ideological square (Van Dijk, 1998) that may be applied at all levels of the discourse: positive topics about *Us* (how tolerant, modern, advanced, peaceful, or intelligent *We* are), negative topics about *Them* (how intolerant, backward, aggressive, etc. *They* are), and avoid negative topics about *Us* (e.g., *our* racism or *our* international aggression, or *their* contribution to our economy and welfare). The same goes for the words or metaphors we use, or what information is explicit or remains implicit, foregrounded or backgrounded, among many other discourse structures. Even the syntax of active or passive sentences may thus be used to emphasize our good properties or to hide or background the bad properties of people talked about.

Polarized ideological discourse is not only based on the polarized ideological mental models of the speakers, but is also persuasively designed to help form or confirm similar ideological models among the recipients of discourse and communication. It is in this way that ideologies are slowly learned and reproduced by public ingroup discourse of many types (from news in the media or school textbooks to everyday conversations). And once such ideological models of specific events are created by the recipients, repeated communication may lead to the formation of socially shared ideological attitudes and, finally, to general, underlying ideologies. We thus analyze and explain how ideologies are formed and reproduced, and at the same time how they are used — and thus at the same time reproduced — in social practices such as discourse and communication. And when the social or political attitudes thus communicated are in the best interests of a dominant group and against the best interests of a dominated group and/or the public at large, we are specifically dealing with the form of persuasion we call manipulation (Van Dijk, 2005).

Context models

The expression and reproduction (or the challenge) of ideologies by discourse is not only controlled by the underlying mental models of events and situations we write or talk *about*. We also have mental *models of the very communicative situation we participate in*, such as a teacher talking in a classroom to her students, a politician addressing other members of parliament, or a journalist writing a news report. Since these models define the context of discourse, we call them context models. They make sure that discourse is appropriate in a given communicative situation — for example what can or cannot be said in a parliamentary debate and how it should (or should not) be said (Van Dijk, 2008a).

In a theory of ideology and its reproduction by discourse, we need to study not only the structures of ideological text or talk, but also, especially, the mental context models representing the definition of the communicative situation by the participants. Indeed, the expression of ideologies is crucially dependent on context. Feminists will not always speak as feminists, depending on the situation, to whom they are speaking, and what the goal of the discourse is. Similarly, racists or male chauvinists may sometimes hide their prejudices if, in their current discourse, it would be against their interests. On the other hand, among group members, or in conflict discourse, ideological discourse may be very explicit in order to teach, propagate, defend, or legitimate the ideology or the practices of a group. Hence, a detailed analysis of the communicative situation is necessary in order to be able to describe and explain the presence or absence and nature of ideological discourse structures.

Ideology is not the same as discourse

Since ideologies are usually expressed and reproduced by text or talk, there is a tendency to confuse or collapse the notion of ideology with that of discourse. In our view, such a conceptual identification is misguided, if only because ideologies are cognitive structures and discourses, as defined here (as concrete instances of text or talk) are linguistic structures, on the one hand, and a form of social action or communication on the other. Ideologies can be *expressed* by discourse, but are not the same as discourse. Ideologies can also be expressed by other social practices, as we know from seeing sexual harassment or racial discrimination being used as expressions of sexist or racist ideologies. In other words, it makes sense to distinguish ideologies as forms of social cognition from the ways they are being expressed and used in discourse or other social practices.

The confusion between discourse and ideology is even more common in the concept of discourse used by Foucault (1971), that is, they are seen not as concrete instances of text or talk, but as systems or orders of discourse (as in genres of political discourse or, even more abstractly, in terms of the discourse of modernity). This more abstract, more philosophical notion of discourse is often also referred to by the capitalized term, Discourse (see, e.g., Gee, 2010). In that case it (vaguely) refers to systems and ideas as well as sets of (concrete) discourses — and hence such a notion is closer to the notion of ideology as defined here. But even for this (macro) concept of Discourse, it makes sense to distinguish between systems of ideas, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ways these

are expressed in, for example, systems of philosophical, political, or media discourses during a given historical period. We also suggest a distinction be made between the general notion of a "system of ideas" (including philosophical systems) and an ideology. Thus, Marx developed a system of ideas, as did many philosophers, but (fragments of) that system only became a (Marxist) ideology when it was acquired, spread, and used by members of a collectivity. Kant also designed a system of ideas, but it would be strange to talk of an ideology of Kantism. In other words, the history and the theory of ideology (and of discourse for that matter) have shown a great deal of theoretical confusion that we can clear up with more explicit analytical categories and distinctions today, for example from contemporary discourse studies and cognitive science.

Ideology and society

The relevance of an analysis of context as part of ideological discourse analysis already establishes a link between ideologies and the social situation, that is, with the identity and goals of groups and group members and their ongoing practices. Thus, whereas the social nature of ideologies is defined by belief systems shared by social groups, and used by group members, we have also seen that the expression, acquisition, and reproduction of ideologies take place in specific social communicative situations. Hence, the communicative theory of ideology presented here triangulates a sociopolitical, cognitive, and discursive component (for the concept of ideology, especially as part of social and political theory, see, among a vast number of books, Eagleton, 1991; Larrain, 1979; Thompson, 1984).

The social component of a theory of ideology deals not only with communicative situations and interactions or social practices at the micro-level of the social order, but also with complex, higher-level societal structure and organization. We have already defined ideologies as a type of belief shared by social groups and their cognitive and discourse structures as polarized between *Us* and *Them*, between ingroups and outgroups, and involving the shared representation of social identities, goals, norms and discourse values, resources, and interests. Such polarization often needs to be based on a societal analysis in terms of power, power abuse, domination, and resistance, including which groups have access to public discourse, such as that of politics, the media, or education — a major power resource. It is in such a broader framework that the fundamental functions of ideologies are described and explained, for instance in terms of the promotion of group cohesion, the coordination of collective action, maintaining or resisting power, defending or challenging resources or other interests, and so on.

At the same time, a societal analysis of ideology needs to be more explicit about the nature of different ideological groups, their position, interests, organization, and collective action. A racist political party, a feminist action group, a pacifist network, a labor union, and a professional organization are all ideological groups, but they have very different properties. Some groups have explicit "ideologues" teaching group ideology to newcomers (as is the case for the catechism of a church), or journalists spreading ideologies through the media of a group, whereas other ideological groups have more informal ways of communicating and reproducing their ideology. Some ideological groups may

be organized with "card-carrying" official members, elections, leaders, and so on, as is the case for political parties, whereas other ideological groups only informally exist as people sharing specific ideological ideas (as is the case for progressive and conservative ideologies — or rather meta-ideologies, because they may dominate many different ideologies). Patriarchy may thus be a powerful dominant ideology, but is often not organized as such, for example by explicit male chauvinist clubs, media, or memberships, but, rather, is present and shared in many or most social groups and organizations dominated by men.

It is also within such a broad sociopolitical framework that we need to describe and explain the changes of ideologies, for instance as a result of the many forms of interaction (including discourse and communication) between ideological groups, or the actions (or lack of action) of the state. A characteristic example has been the positive influence of ecological ideologies on many existing consumerist or industrial ideologies — as may be concluded from the analysis of the "ecologically conscious" advertising of polluting oil companies, or the influence of feminism on traditional chauvinist ideologies and practices. Obviously, ideologies may develop as a function of economic and sociocultural conditions — even when the general Marxian thesis of the influence of the economic base on the (ideological) superstructure is too vague and not generally true. Pacifism may be hard to defend when the country is invaded. Racism and xenophobia typically tend to grow when immigration drastically increases, especially in economically hard times, as is the case in Europe today. Socialism developed as a reaction to capitalism, and antiracism is by definition a reaction to racism and its discriminatory practices (for more recent studies of political ideologies, see, e.g., Freeden, 1996).

Of course, these are all very general, societal macroprocesses that need detailed microanalysis of the precise mechanisms involved, such as the discourse and communication practices of an ideological group, how such discourses are understood and how they form persuasive mental models and changing attitudes among members of other ideological groups, and how these changing attitudes are in turn collectively reproduced in other groups by various kinds of public discourse (political debate, policies, news, propaganda, advertising, teaching, and so on).

In other words, even a macrosociological approach to the development, changes, and influences of ideologies in terms of groups, group relations, power, institutions, laws, and so on, often requires detailed discourse and communication analysis. Ideologies may partly develop as a result of the social and political circumstances of a group (e.g., as a reaction to oppression and discrimination, or as legitimation of power abuse), yet for the mental models of personal experiences (including emotions and opinions about such personal experiences) to become *shared* in a group, so that others know what I know and feel, people need to talk, write, and communicate. Hence, at all levels of the theory of ideology, we always need

1   a *macrosociological* component of social or political situations, conditions, or group relations (of power, competition, etc.), on the one hand, and a *microsociological* component of everyday interaction or social practices, especially talk and text, on the other;

2 a *sociocognitive* component of mental models of specific, personal, situated experiences, on the one hand, and generic, sociocultural attitudes, ideologies, norms, and values, on the other; and

3 a detailed *analysis of the many ideologically influenced structures of text and talk* as forms of discursive interaction in specific situations and social practices, on the one hand, and a general analysis of access to discourse, specific genres, and the overall communication institutions and processes in society — including, for instance, an analysis of media practices, control, and power, on the other. These ideological communicative practices are themselves instances of the microsociological component with its macrosociological consequences, making the theory a complete system of ideological reproduction in society.

In other words, each of the components of theoretical triangulation between society, cognition, and discourse/communication has a micro and a macro level of analysis.

An example: Racism

By way of example, let us finally be more specific about racism as an ideology and how it is discursively reproduced in society (for detail, see Van Dijk, 1991, 1993, 1998a, 1998b)

Racism is a social system of domination, in which "white" (European, etc.) groups dominate "non-white" (non-European) groups. This overall system is implemented and daily reproduced at the micro level in and by specific forms of racist practice and interaction, leading to discrimination. This system of domination or inequality and its discriminatory practices are based on and legitimated by an underlying, socially shared system of racist ideology, in which (white) ingroups are represented positively and (non-white) outgroups are represented negatively.

This overall ideology is derived from and then again applied in the formation or confirmation of racist attitudes, for example about immigration, elections, busing, quotas, intelligence, the labor market, and so on. These attitudes in turn are derived (bottom up) from and again applied (top down) in the formation of, personally variable, racist mental models of specific group members about specific "racial" or "ethnic" events in specific situations. These various levels of racist mental representation are all involved in the production of racist practices, for example exclusion, marginalization, and problematization of many different kinds.

One of these ideological racist practices, discourse or communication, has a double function. On the one hand text and talk may be discriminatory practices like all others (and exclude, problematize, and marginalize immigrants or minority members), and thus reproduce the overall system of racist domination as explained above. On the other hand, discourse is crucial in the development, and especially the reproduction, of the underlying racist attitudes and ideologies that sociocognitively "ground" the system of domination, and provide its rationale and legitimation. This is especially the case for the role of public discourses, such as the discourses of politics and the bureaucracy, the mass media and education.

However, only specific social groups, the symbolic elites, control and have preferential access to such public discourses, making them primarily responsible for the discursive reproduction of racism, whether or not they are influenced by non-elite members of the dominant group (influence that itself is discursively managed and controlled). At the same macro level of the analysis of racism, we further need to examine the role of (racist or antiracist) political parties, legislation, the courts, racist and antiracist organizations, and so on. Much of this analysis is again based on the public discourses (and their cognitive and social consequences) of these groups and institutions.

In other words, a complex system of domination such as racism and its underlying ideology needs to be studied in terms of the social, cognitive, and discursive analysis of its development, reproduction, and change. Detailed, and systematic discourse analysis can be used to study the empirical data at all levels and in each component.

SEE ALSO: Argumentation, Political; Cognition, Political; Collective Memory; Discourse Analysis; Feminist Theory; Groupthink; Language, Political; Manipulation; Persuasion, Political; Polarization, Political; Political Discourse; Political Psychology; Stereotypes; Values

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