

Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology



THE THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Conspiracy theory as collective motivated cognition

Doctoral School of Psychology, Program of Socialization and Social Processes

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1. Theoretical background

The HIV virus was deliberately developed in American state laboratories in order to spread the deadly virus among the black community. Behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center, there were no Muslim extremists and Osama bin Laden, but the American government which wants to reaffirm its power and wants to wage a profitable war in the Middle-East. The existence of the H1N1 virus is just a fairy-tale, and with the anti-serum, they inject a microchip that was developed with nano-technology into our body, which does not only gather information about us, but makes us “remote-controlled”. All these are only a few examples of the widespread conspiracy theories that dominated the last decade. For the skeptical laymen and the researchers of the topic, the main questions have been unchanged for a long time. Why do we believe in these theories, what do we expect to “gain” from them? Why is it good to imagine a world inhabited by evil empires that have total control over us, take our lives and deceive us with the help of the media? What causes the stubbornness of conspiracy theories on the hand, and its popularity on the other? In the dissertation, I shall give answers by examining specific cases.

In the dissertation, conspiracy theories (using earlier technical definitions: e.g. Zonis and Joseph, 1994) can be defined as beliefs according to which several super powers secretly conspire to carry out a plan, which can be harmful for one’s own group, and which has the goal of exercising some kind of political and economic power over the group.

Since this definition is too broad when talking about conspiracy theories, further aspects are added to narrow down the range of beliefs which we find worth researching:

- Popularity: those conspiracy theories are worth special examination that are widespread among the public as their significance and virtuality are much greater.
- Dangerousness (based on Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009): those conspiracy theories are worth a more thorough examination that bears a significant danger to the society (e.g. conspiracy theories against an ethnic group).
- Improbability (based on Aaronovitch, 2009): it is worth examining conspiracy theories that are less probable ways of depicting reality as far as we are concerned – even if their erroneousness cannot be proved a priori.

There are three often mentioned prejudices about conspiracy theories that need to be revised: conspiracy theories 1) are autotelic and useless, 2) have a psychopathological background, 3) are the results of human stupidity and lack of education. The key expression of the dissertation, the collective motivated cognition comes from these three concepts.

Conspiracy theory thinking is characterized as *motivated collective cognition*. As a belief that helps the group understand the world in a way that fits the specific identity, thinking and motivation of the group. This way it provides the group a satisfactory explanation to the phenomena of the social and political world. The conspiracy theory will be embedded in a group concept driven by motivations and emotions. My reasoning is built upon the concept of “motivated social cognition” (Webster and Kruglanski, 1994; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, Sullaway, 2003), and the concepts of “hot cognition” and “motivated reasoning” (Kunda, 1990). My concept goes beyond the concept of motivated social cognition by emphasizing not only the social context and orientation of cognition, but also its *social and collective nature* in aspects:

- 1) the bearers of theories are groups too, which are rooted in social identity and draw a line between the ingroup and the outgroup (see e.g. Kramer and Jost, 2002)
- 2) conspiracy theories are not concepts about individuals, but about the behavior and intentions of other social groups, and the cognition of the operation of the whole social-political system. My approach builds on the concept of motivated social cognition to an extent to emphasize the *situational* definiteness of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories have several psychological advantages:

- the protection of the group (and the individual within);
- the explanation of unusual, atypical phenomena;
- the weakening of inveterate status hierarchies.

To these functions that are connected to the concept of motivated collective cognition, there are several sub-functions.

2. Asking questions and building up the study

I was trying to get answers to six questions in the study:

Q1. Are conspiracy theory attitudes widespread (in the Hungarian society today)? My expectation is yes. Based on other representative studies in other countries (e.g. Saad, 2003; Public Policy Polling, 2013; BBC; 2006), I believe the conspiracy view can characterize the majority of the population.

Q2. Do attitudes related to social hierarchy and group identity explain conspiracy theories in a better way than individual psychological variables? My expectation is yes. (function: protection of the group and the weakening of status hierarchies).

Q3. Is the concept of conspiracy theories related to attitudes that strengthen or weaken status hierarchy (or neither)? My expectation is that with weakening attitudes (function: the weakening of status hierarchies).

Q4. Do psychological or sociological variables give a better explanation to conspiracy theories? My expectation is yes. (function: protection of the group, cognition of atypical phenomena, the weakening of status hierarchies).

Q5. Is the conspiracy theory related to the demand of the individual to get an explanation to an atypical phenomenon? My expectation is yes. (function: the explanation of atypical phenomena).

Q6. Is the thinking of conspiracy theories related to a higher or lower level of distress? What kind of fears and distresses does the conspiracy theory view relate to? My expectation is that it is related to a higher level, basically “collective” and not individual distress. (function: protection of the group, the explanation of atypical phenomena).

The three researches shown below are trying to give answers to these questions. (see Table 1)

Table 1: The introduction of research which is a part of the dissertation

Study	time of sampling	Number of samples	Character of sampling
Conspiracy theories in the context of the economic crisis	October, 2009	N=1200	representative national (personal inquiry, Medián omnibus survey)
Conspiracy theories explaining the red mud catastrophe	October - December, 2010	N=302	convenience
Conspiracy theory and the legal system	April, 2011	N=1000	representative national, personal inquiry

3. The introduction of the studies

STUDY 1: CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CRISIS

The first study is a thorough one which introduces and tests the means of measuring used in the research, gives a picture about the range of conspiracy views, and gives guidelines for further research. The advantage of the characteristic of the research (scale questions in a representative omnibus sampling) is that it gives an opportunity to get an exact picture about how widespread these conspiracy theories are in the Hungarian society, and to examine the relationship of these views with “hard” socio-demographic variables. The examination took place within the monthly standard omnibus sampling of Medián Polling and Market Research Institute. It was carried out between October 2 and 6, 2009 in more than 100 settlements of the country by asking randomly chosen 1200 adults. The average age of the sample is 46.8 years, the proportion of women is 53.2%, the proportion of men is 46.8%. The highest schooling is as follows: primary school: 25.1%, vocational school: 31.4%, high school: 29.9%, university: 13.5%.

We used our measuring scale in this research first, called Conspiracy Ideology Scale, which has good psychometric indicators (one factor structure, $\alpha=0.81$). The results are shown by figures 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Figure 2: the results of the first study: questions, hypotheses and their fulfillment

Research question	Hypothesis	Fulfillment
Q1. Are conspiracy theory attitudes widespread (in the Hungarian society today)?	H1: The level of schooling is not related to a conspiracy theory worldview.	Fulfilled.
	H2: The conspiracy theory worldview is quite widespread among the population: it is present at one third of the people.	Fulfilled.
Q2. Do attitudes related to social hierarchy and group identity explain conspiracy theories in a better way than individual psychological variables?	H3: The conspiracy theory worldview shows a stronger correlation with “collective” worries about the situation of the country than with worries about one’s own household.	Was not proved ¹ .
Q3: Is the concept of conspiracy theories related to attitudes that strengthen or weaken status hierarchy?	H4: We can find a negative relationship between the figures of institutional trust and conspiracy theories.	Proved (related to the media).
	H5: We suppose that the conspiracy theory worldview will have a negative relationship with the judgment about the EU membership.	Proved.
	H6: Conspiracy theory ideology is expected to be high among Jobbik voters from among all parties.	Not fulfilled directly. ²
	H7: In East-Hungary, we find more prevalent conspiracy theory thinking, and more moderate in Central and West-Hungary.	Partly fulfilled: Central-Hungary has a lower level of conspiracy theory worldview; the influence of East-Hungary was not left in the model.
Q4: Do psychological or sociological variables give a better explanation to conspiracy theories?	H8: We expect to see the psychological variables explain the bigger part of the variance than the socio-demographic variables.	Proved (the only socio-demographic variable that was left in the model: the region, is responsible for less than 4% of the variance).
Q6. Is the thinking of conspiracy theories related to a higher or lower level of distress?	H9: Worries about the future will show a stronger relationship with conspiracy theory worldview than the negative assessment of the past.	Proved.

¹ Not with regression process, but at the same time, there is some significant correlation.

² The influence of Jobbik in itself significant of the conspiracy worldview. Moreover, not only in itself: if we take out the MFC from the list of parties from the above model, the regression analysis inversely integrates the opposition to Jobbik (and the opposition of SZDSZ directly) to the predictors of the conspiracy worldview. So it seems that the anti-Roma attitude of Jobbik, which is an inherent part of its politics, neutralizes the influence of negative/positive attitudes towards the party. Based on this, in reality the “ideological” content (anti-Roma attitude, anti-liberalism) of choosing a party is determining and not the fact of choosing itself.

Based on the result, the following hypotheses were obviously proven: H1 hypothesis (the level of education is not related to conspiracy theory worldview), H2 hypothesis (being widespread), H4 hypothesis (negative correlation of institutional trust and the conspirational correlation – related to the media), H5 hypothesis (the negative correlation of anti-EU membership attitudes), H9 hypothesis (the worries about the future being more serious than the assessment of the past), and maybe most importantly, H8 hypothesis (the greater role of psychological – attitudinal – variables in predicting conspiracy ideology than socio-demographic variables). H7 hypothesis was partly proved (regional differences). At the same time, the overriding effect of “collective” fears over individual fears (H3) and the role of Jobbik support (H6) were not proved.

Figure 3: The evaluation of the previous and the following 1 year in light of conspiracy theory belief

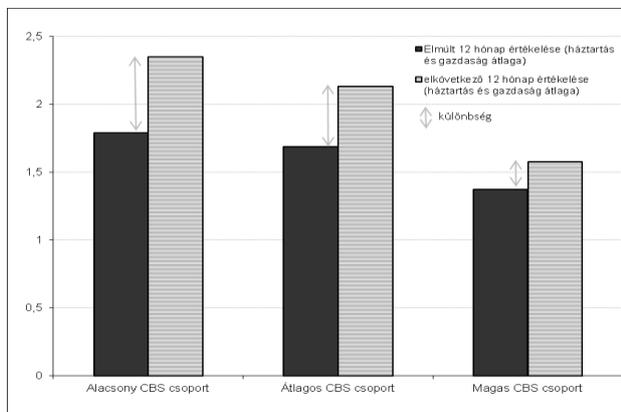


Figure 5: Conspiracy worldview in light of party opposition.

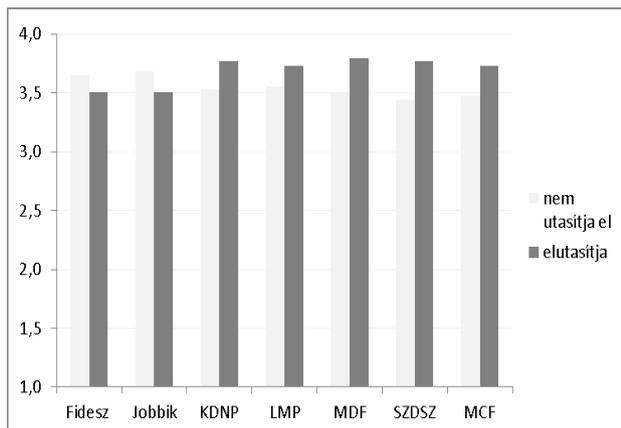


Figure 4: Conspirational ideology in light the support for EU membership

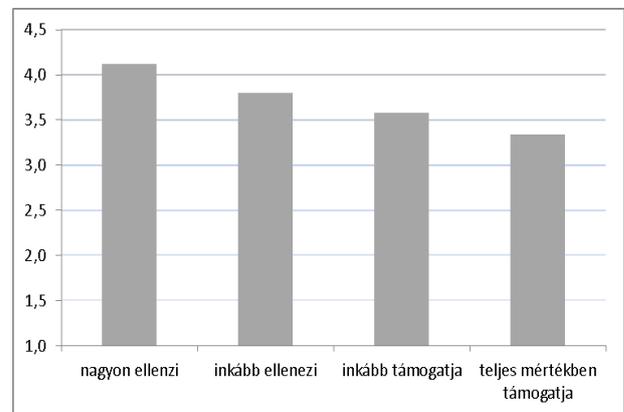
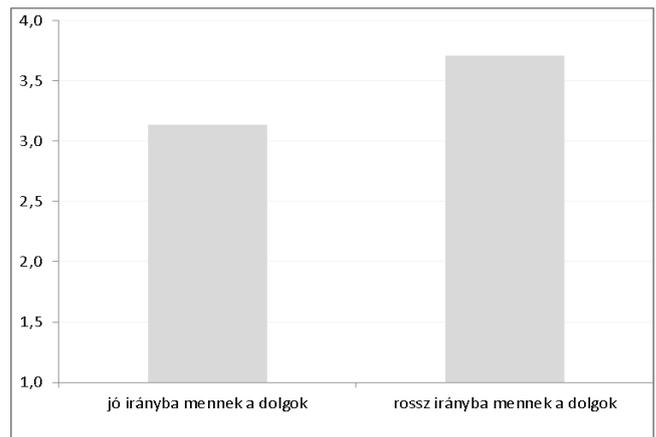


Figure 6: The value of conspiracy worldview (CWS) in light of the assessment of the direction of the development in Hungary



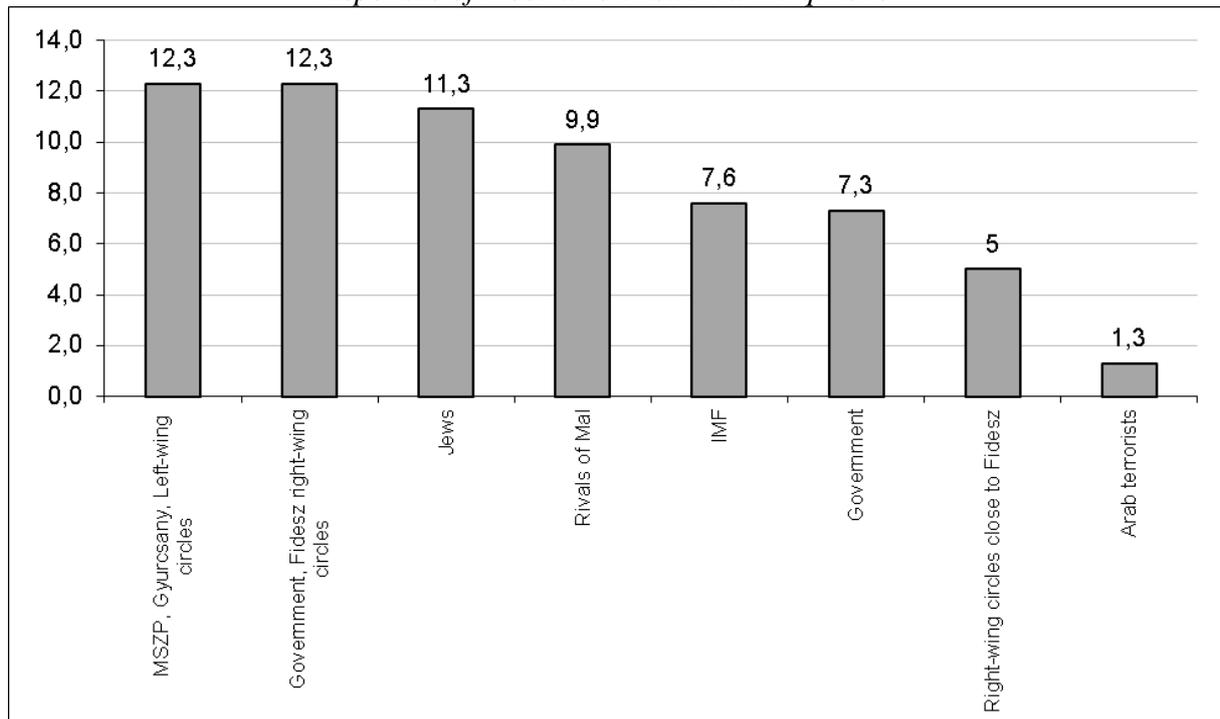
STUDY 2: CONSPIRACY THEORIES EXPLAINING UNEXPECTED AND TRAGIC EVENTS

The second study took place between October and December, 2010. Sampling started on October 15, after the red mud catastrophe of October 4. The aim was to a) check whether in case of unexpected and tragic events (in addition in a politically heated context as it happened right before the local elections), certain theories (e.g. Groh, 1987; Glick, 2005) are right or wrong when predicting the appearance of conspiracy theories; b) to examine the role of the general conspiracy worldview in the explanation of a specific conspiracy theory; c) to map out the background of conspiracy theories, and to compare role of personal features, attitudinal characteristics and event-specific variables; and d) to prove that variables connected to group identity have a more advanced explanation conspiracy theory ideas related to conspiracy theory ideology and specific events than individual (personality) variables.

302 people were included in the written survey. The selection process was done with the help of the Psychology BA students of ELTE PPK who attended the Socio-psychological course in the autumn of 2010. The sample, in fact, became more heterogeneous than the traditional university sampling (and obviously not representative). The gender composition was rather balanced, contrary to the traditional university samples, it included more men (159 men and 138 women). The average age was 31.2 years (SD:11.31). The highest level of education also showed a heterogeneous sampling. The participants gave the following answers (in brackets the proportion within the whole sample): 9 (3%) completed or did not complete primary school, 27 (8.9%) finished vocational school, 64 (21.2%) finished secondary technical school, 79 (26.2%) finished high school, 100 (37.1%) finished college or university, and one (0.3%) respondent had a PhD. 10 respondents (3.3%) did not answer this question. Examining the place of residence, 94 respondents (46.7% of the sample) lived in Budapest, the distribution of other respondents was quite heterogeneous. One sixth of the sample (51 people) were from Veszprém County where the disaster happened.

In this study, I created 2 conspiracy scales. The *Conspiracy Wordview Scale II (CWS II)* is the extended version of the measuring device used in the first survey. With unweighted averaging of the 9 items, I created a scale ($M=2.93$, $\alpha=0.88$, $SD=0.87$). The 13-item scale measuring the conspiracy opinions related to the red mud disaster was also created with unweighted averaging. This way I ended up with a measuring system with high inner consistency ($\alpha=0.9$; $M=2.1$; $SD=0.9$). The participants had 9 options (which all included the possibilities that had appeared in the conspiracy theories related to the topic) to chose from to decide who could have been behind the tragedy. This could have helped to identify what secret intrigue of the actors of the conspiracy theories the respondents suspected. The majority (79% of the sample) chose the option “none”. Among those who chose a group, the most frequent answer was the Jews (11.3%), the rivals of MAL (9.9%), and the IMF (8%). (Figure 7)

Figure 7. Whose interests are served by the red sludge catastrophe? The distribution of responses of those who answered the question.



Most hypotheses of the study were proven in the light of the data. The data about the fulfillment of the hypotheses is assessed in Figure 8.

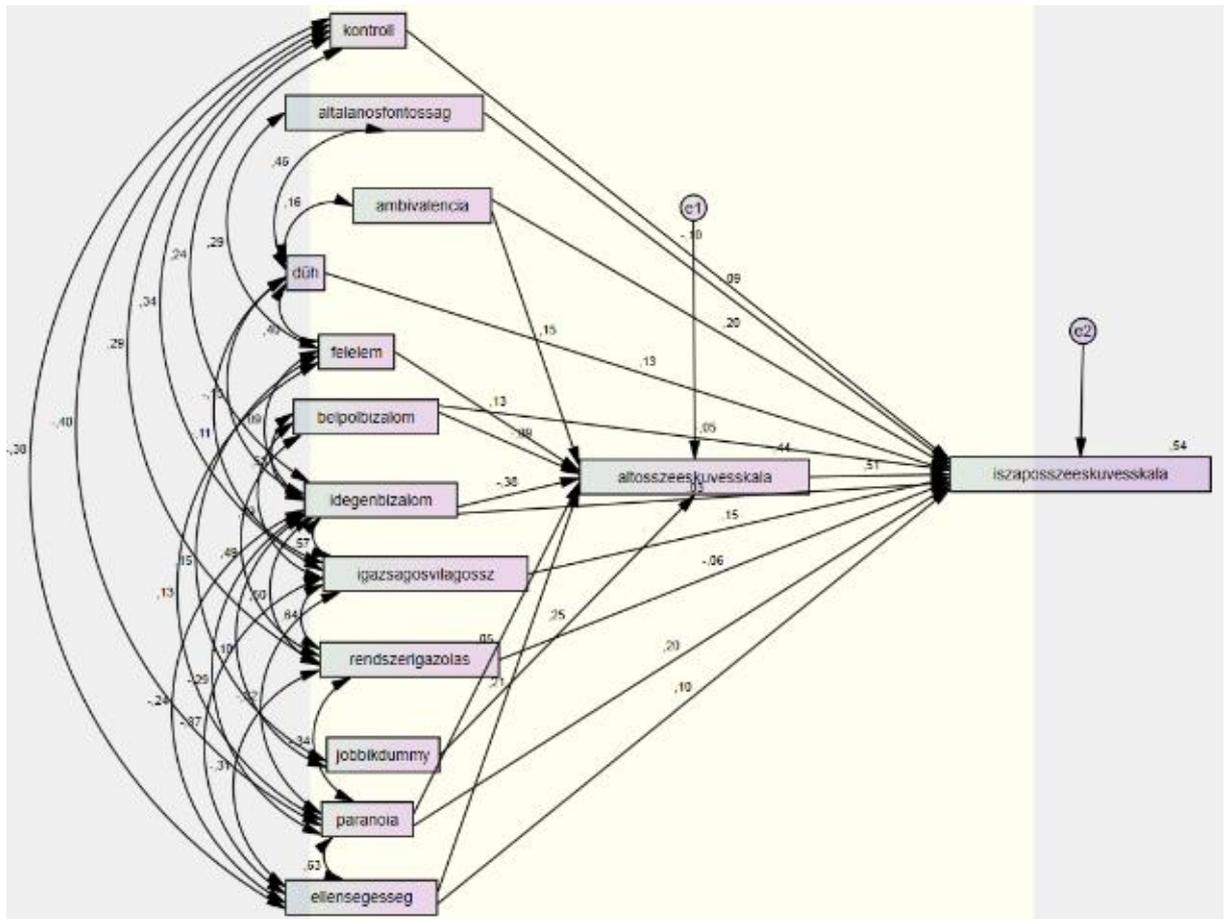
Figure 8: Hypotheses of the second study and their fulfillment

Research question	Hypothesis	Fulfillment
K3. Q3: Is the concept of conspiracy theories related to attitudes that strengthen or weaken status hierarchy (or neither)? (function: the weakening of status hierarchies).	H1. Both the justification of the system and the variables of faith in a just world show a negative direction correlation with conspiracy worldview and the conspiracy attitudes related to the red mud disaster.	Partly proved: the road model shows a direct link between the two variables and the RSCCS.
	H2. The anti-establishment Jobbik party preference is related to the conspiracy worldview and the conspiracy attitudes related to the red mud disaster.	Partly proved: Jobbik party preference has an influence through CWS on RSCCS.
	H3. The RSCCS and the CWS show a negative correlation with institutional trust.	Partly proved: trust is in a direct relationship with the RSCCS.
	H4. Subjective control is in a negative correlation with VWS and RSCCS.	Partly proved: trust is in a direct relationship with the RSCCS.
Q6. Is the thinking of conspiracy theories related to a higher or lower level of distress? What kind of fears and distresses does the	H6: the ambivalence related to the case (informational uncertainty) has a negative correlation with the RSCCS.	Proved: it has both a direct and an indirect link.
	H7: Critical sense has a negative correlation with RSCCS.	Partly proved: the role of the predictor in the regression model

conspiracy theory view relate to? (function: explanation of atypical phenomena).		was obvious (and a positive direction!), the variable dropped from the road model.
	H8: The anger felt after the event has a positive influence on the RSCCS.	Proved.
	H9: The fear felt after the event has a positive influence on the RSCCS.	Partly proved: the regression model obviously had a direct effect, while the road model had an indirect effect.
Q5. Is the conspiracy theory related to the demand of the individual to get an explanation to an atypical phenomenon? (function: explanation of atypical phenomena)	H10: The conspiracy world view shows a correlation to the agreement with conspiracy theories explaining the red mud disaster, but at the same time, it will not be able to explain the greater part of the variance.	Proved.
Q2. Do attitudes related to social hierarchy and group identity explain conspiracy theories in a better way than individual psychological variables? (function: weakening of group protection and status hierarchies).	H11: The attitude variables (conspiracy worldview, justification of the system, institutional trust, faith in a better world, Jobbik party preference, control) belonging to group identity have an aggregate effect on beliefs related to the red mud disaster, and this effect exceeds the rate of the predictor role of personal factors (Big Five Paranoia, Animosity, Self-evaluation)	Proved.

The full model can explain 54% of the beliefs in the red mud disaster conspiracy theories. Both direct and indirect (system justification) ways could be proved (figure 9).

Figure 9: The explanation model of conspiracy theories related to the red mud disaster



The model which explains the 54% of the dependent variable. The fit indices are acceptable: ($\chi^2(45)=87.3$; $p=0.000$; NFI=0.928; CFI=0.962; TLI=0.924; RMSEA=0.63).

STUDY 3: CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CRISIS

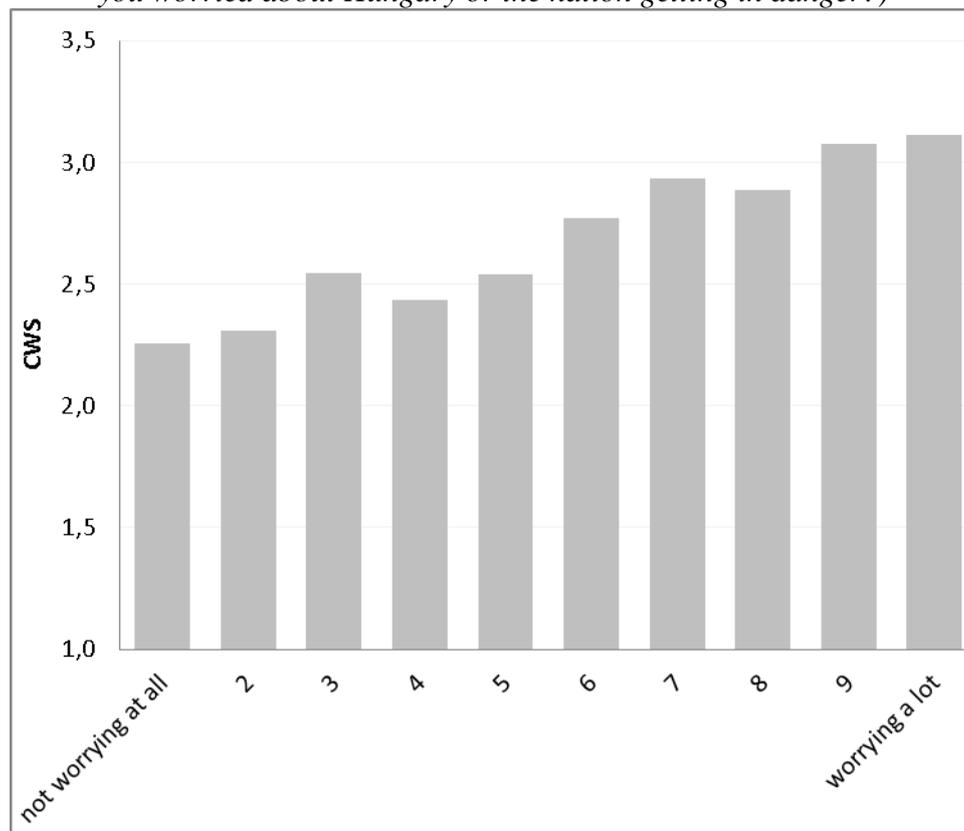
In this part, I was trying to find out the relationship between the belief in conspiracy theories and the cognition of social hierarchy, the attitudes against groups at the “top” and at the “bottom”. The research made it possible to have a more detailed uncovering of the public discourse thinking of conspiracy theories related to the state apparatus and the legal system. The research was part of the research carried out by the Communication Theory Research Group of MTA-ELTE, led by György Hunyady and Katalin Pörzse at ELTE PPK. The survey was conducted with a representative sample regarding sex, age, type of settlement. 1,000 people were asked with the address list provided by the Census Office in April, 2011. The average age of the sample was 48.3 years, in proportion to the male-female rate of the sample, it was 52.3% and 47.7%. The percentages of educational level are the following: 23% at most primary school, 27% secondary technical school, 33.1% high school diploma, and 16.8% finished university.

During this study, most of the hypotheses were proved (see fig. 10). It seems obvious from the results that our belief in a just world shows a negative correlation with the conspiracy theory ideology, as stated in the first hypothesis. The same relationship with the country being threatened shows a positive trend as stated in hypothesis 6 (see fig. 11). In accordance with the third hypothesis the recognized indecency of institutions was related to conspiracy theories, but its recognized competence was not. However, in connection with the hypothesis, the recognized independence had no significant role. The conspiracy theory ideology showed no significant correlation with value conservatism, but at the same time, the cluster analysis showed some difference between the specific groups. With social-dominance-orientation, contrary to the second hypothesis, the conspiracy worldview showed a positive correlation.

Figure 10: The results of the third study in light of the hypotheses

Research questions	Hypotheses	Fulfillment
Q3. Is the concept of conspiracy theories related to attitudes that strengthen or weaken status hierarchy (or neither)?	H1: Faith in a just world has a negative correlation with conspiracy worldview.	Fulfilled.
	H2: Conspiracy theories show no positive correlation with the social-Darwinism scale, which is related to social dominance orientation	Not fulfilled. (I find positive correlation).
	H3: It is expected that of the dimensions of institutional trust, the conspiracy worldview will mainly show a correlation with recognized disrespect and lack of independence, and not with the recognized efficiency of the institutions.	Partly fulfilled. (there was correlation only with the recognized indecency).
	H4: We expect that value conservatism will have a positive correlation with conspiracy theory thinking – in light of the fact that conspiracy theories can be regarded as opposition to modernity (see e.g. Moscovici and Graumann, 1987).	Partly fulfilled. (Attitude-conservatism had no effect on conspiracy worldview, but at the same time, there was a significant difference in the clusters in this dimension)
Q6. Is the thinking of conspiracy theories related to a higher or lower level of distress? What kind of fears and distresses does the conspiracy theory view relate to?	H5: Based on the collective nature of conspiracy theories, we expect conspiracy worldview is related to threats against the nation, and less related to individual fears (of making a living, crime, individual freedom)	Fulfilled. (see fig. 10)

Figure 11: Conspiracy Worldview (CWS) points in light of collective worries. (How much are you worried about Hungary or the nation getting in danger?)



The interpretation of the results

Before the studies, I posed six rather general research questions, and intended to get answers to them through the research. Now, I shall answer these questions combining the data of the three examinations. In general, it can be stated that I got answers from the data, most of hypotheses was proved, and the results indicate the direction of new research.

Q1. Are conspiracy theory attitudes widespread (in the Hungarian society today)?

My expectation in this respect was met based on both representative samples. In the first survey in 2009, more than two thirds of the respondents agreed with the scales representing conspiracy worldview. In the third survey, this rate was much lower: less than one third of the sample, and the cluster analysis found only in one group (in the anti-establishment group, which constituted 13% of the whole sample) “experienced”, conscious conspiracy worldview (conformists, who also got high points on the Conspiracy Worldview factor do not belong here). As expressed above, the changing public mood between 2009 and 2011 can be responsible for the different proportions. The wide range of data shows how widespread conspiracy theories are on the one hand, and their versatility on the other. This result is in line with those points of view which emphasize the sensitivity of stereotypes to political-historical contexts and their ability to change fast. This viewpoint (see e.g. Hunyady, 1996; Haslam et al, 1992) is opposite the one that holds that stereotypes are historically deeply rooted and unchangeable.

Q2. Do attitudes related to social hierarchy and group identity explain conspiracy theories in a better way than individual psychological variables?

My expectation about the bigger role of variables related to group identities (which belong to the conspiracy theory functions of group protection and the weakening of status hierarchy) was not proved by the first survey, however the second one did, as it emphasized the *role of threats against the nation*. Based on this, another of my pre-concept seems to be proved as well: conspiracy theories are rather a socio-psychological than an individual-psychological phenomenon, which tends to show a correlation with social and group tensions, and not individual tensions. We must also see that here we were not playing a “secure game” to prove their hypotheses, as such close variables were chosen for the conspiracy theories (e.g. paranoia, animosity) which seemingly had a serious influence on (specific) conspiracy theory beliefs.

Q3. Is the concept of conspiracy theories related to attitudes that strengthen or weaken status hierarchy (or neither)?

In accordance with the expectations, the majority of the data support the case that conspiracy theories are related to attitudes that weaken status hierarchies – namely as Sidanius and Pratto (2005) put it: myths that legitimize the weakening of hierarchies. Conspiracy theory cognition is positively related to institutional trust, justification of the system and faith in a just world, but there is no relation to conservatism. At the same time, the interesting result of the third examination was that among anti-establishment people who accept conspiracy theories, social Darwinism which rhymes with dominance orientation was strong. One would think that social Darwinism is basically the ideology of higher status groups, but it was not so in this case. The conspiracy worldview, examined as a separate variable, showed a correlation with social Darwinism as a legitimizing myth that strengthens the hierarchy. The explanation of this paradox can be ideological: the rate of anti-establishment people is far the highest among Jobbik supporters, and the conspiracy theory beliefs were also related to the support of Jobbik in the second examination.

Q4. Do psychological or sociological variables give a better explanation to conspiracy theories? (function: protection of the group, cognition of atypical phenomena, the weakening of status hierarchies).

The researches – in line with the results of earlier examinations (e.g. Goertzel, 1994) – obviously showed that conspiracy theories are found in every group of the society, cannot be localized to the groups of for example low status groups. The first examination found a significant difference in conspiracy worldview and the type of settlement according to the region, the third found a difference in age, schooling and subjective financial situation and the clusters. Based on the results of the third examination, it can be stated that the effects of socio-demographic variables does not seem to be fully insignificant, but at the same time, there are stronger attitudinal than socio-demographic differences.

Q5. Is the conspiracy theory related to the demand of the individual to get an explanation to an atypical phenomenon? (function: the explanation of atypical phenomena).

Based on the results of the second examination, it can be stated that conspiracy theories have a significant role in the explanation of such unexpected and emotional events such as the red mud disaster. There is a direct correlation between the anger, fear and recognized

ambivalence and the faith in conspiracy theories (but not the significance of the recognized event). Further (probably experimental) research will have to show what environmental factors strengthen the attractiveness of a conspiracy theory explanation after an unexpected event with a huge effect (e.g. Groh, 1987, Inglehart, 1987, Glick, 2005).

Q6. Is the thinking of conspiracy theories related to a higher or lower level of distress? What kind of fears and distresses does the conspiracy theory view relate to? (function: protection of the group, the explanation of atypical phenomena).

My expectation was that it is related to a higher level of distress, fears and worries (I did not distinguish these emotions in the research). This result was obviously shown in all three cases. This result was proven in all three examinations. The third one also supported the fact that faith in conspiracy theories is related to a higher level, “collective” and not so much of individual distress (for example there is a higher level of worry that Hungary or the nation might be in danger than one’s own worry about making ends meet).

An important question comes up here: the problem of cause and effect. I started off in the research with the statement that the conspiracy theory explanation reduces distress, or at least has an important role in managing distress. Thus I suppose that creating conspiracy theories is the reaction to higher levels of distress, and without them, distress would even be bigger. The cause-effect relationship can be of several types, and only complex experimental examinations can decide unequivocally:

- 1) The acceptance of conspiracy theory beliefs is the reaction to distress and fear, and it reduces the effect of these. (e.g. Groh, 1987).
- 2) Conspiracy theory can play a role in the rationalization of inexplicable and unjustified fear (e.g. in the case of the respondents who were not directly affected by the red mud disaster). In this case, however, beliefs do not reduce the level of fear and distress, only make it explicable (this reasoning would follow from the theory of e.g. Festinger [2000]).
- 3) Threatening conspiracy theory beliefs themselves result in a higher level of fear and distress (of the earlier researches, for example the results of Butler et al [1995] supports this approach).

All in all, in my opinion, the studies justify the concept of “collective motivated cognition” for conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are collective since it is related to attitudinal changes that explain the system of the society and express a group identity. It is motivated as it contributes to the preservation of the psychological well-being of the group, to treating distress in a group, and weakening the hierarchy among groups. And it is cognition, as its main goals are to explain unusual social situations and phenomena.