

POWER CHALLENGING AND SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION
EFFECT OF PERCEIVED THREAT

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Abstract

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: Based on the integrated threat theory (ITT), the perceived threat of Islamic fundamentalism, Refugee Crisis, and Climate Change can promote conspiracy mentality and system justification. These two psychological concepts have some common grounds such as the motives behind them and the defense mechanism function. They affect the trust in government and outgroups differently. The perceived threats of Refugee Crisis and Islamic fundamentalism are intergroup threats while Climate Change is a global threat, therefore their effect on conspiracy mentality, system justification, and trust in government and outgroups is different.

HYPOTHESES: Based on the theoretical background we hypothesized that any threat could facilitate conspiracy mentality and system justification. However, we assumed that these two concepts affect the trust in government and outgroups differently. The higher the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis, the higher the trust in government and the level of defense needed, resulting in a low level of outgroup trust. On the other hand, we supposed that Climate Change would not affect the trust in government and less likely to increase the need for a defense mechanism, resulting in higher trust in outgroups.

METHODS: The data were collected from 463 Hungarian of whom 251 were females, 211 were males, and their average age was 40. The survey used the System Justification Scale, the Generalized Conspiracy Belief Scale, and the Global Trust Inventory specific for government and outgroups.

RESULTS: The results showed that all three threats facilitate conspiracy mentality. The perceived threat of Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis also directly favors system justification and the trust in government, and through system justification, they increase the trust in outgroups, otherwise directly decreasing it. The perceived threat of Climate Change does not affect system justification but it increases the trust in outgroups. Conspiracy mentality decreases the trust in government while system justification increases it.

CONCLUSION: Intergroup threats and global threats should be integrated differently as they have different effects on conspiracy mentality, system justification, and trust in government and outgroups.

Keywords: threat perception, conspiracy mentality, system justification, trust in outgroups, trust in government

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I. Theoretical background

1.1. Introduction

In the present study, we examined how threat perception (Climate Change, Islamic fundamentalism, and Refugee Crisis) affect the trust in government and outgroups through conspiracy theories and system justification. Threat perception favors the occurrence of conspiracy theories and system justification. Both concepts stem from the same psychological motives and affect the trust in government and outgroups.

1.2. The Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)

Migration increased in the past few years and at the same time, the negative attitude toward immigrants also have increased dramatically (Ngwayuh & Croucher, 2017). One of the possible reasons for this growing negative attitude could be the threat perception (Davidov & Semyonov, 2017). People might perceive a threat from immigrants because they believe immigration causes unemployment, and they worry about their jobs and well-being (Ngwayuh & Croucher, 2017). People might also perceive cultural, moral, and religious differences, and feel that their society and culture are threatened. This threat perception may lead to discrimination toward immigrants and treating them as outsiders (Davidov & Semyonov, 2017, Ngwayuh & Croucher, 2017, Stephan & Stephan, 2000).

The integrated threat theory developed by Stephan & Stephan (2000) stresses that the underlying motivation of negative attitude towards outgroup or outsiders (often from different cultures) is the protection of the ingroup's interest. The theory differentiates four types of threats that can lead to negative attitudes or discriminative behavior towards outgroups: realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes (Croucher, 2017).

Realistic threats are perceived threats to the current welfare and safety of the ingroup, they threaten one's survival, well-being, and governmental authority; these threats are usually perceived from outsiders and caused by the competition over scarce resources like job opportunities and wealth (Makashvili et al., 2018; Ngwayuh & Croucher, 2017, Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Both Refugee Crisis and Climate Change can be considered realistic threats as they might threaten one's survival or well-being, however in a different way. Refugee Crisis caused by the outgroup, such as the immigrants can be perceived as a threat because it produces more job seekers than there are jobs to be filled and people are afraid of unemployment. Climate

Change is also a realistic threat; however, it is not caused by a specific group of people but by humankind; it is realistic since it threatens the habitat and survival of human beings.

Symbolic threats are instead caused by perceived differences in perspective between the ingroup and outgroup regarding symbolic entities such as religion, culture, morals, or attitude (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis can be perceived as symbolic threats. In both cases, people are from another culture and have different religious, cultural, and moral standards, which may be perceived as threatening. Esses et al. (1993) stress that the more a group perceives its culture and religion to be threatened, the more discriminative it will be (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). The LGBTQs are often discriminated negatively, therefore, they might be a good example of perceived symbolic threats. Homophobia and symbolic threats are positively associated, the higher the perceived symbolic threat the higher the level of prejudice toward LGBTQs (Warriner et al., 2013 as cited in Croucher, 2017).

Intergroup anxiety can also produce perceived threats, which can be experienced through intergroup interactions. It can take different forms from the fear of rejection, embarrassment, ridicule, exploitation, and the lack of former contact with the other group, to the situations when the outgroup is perceived to have better political, social, or economic circumstances than the ingroup (Croucher, 2017). Previous studies found that intergroup anxiety and attitude toward outsiders are negatively correlated, which means that the higher the intergroup anxiety, the less positive the attitude towards the outgroup (Stephan et al., 1999; Stephan et al., 2000).

Negative stereotypes are prejudiced presuppositions regarding the outgroup that are held by the ingroup. The threat here is associated with negative consequences that are expectedly accompanied by the interaction with the outgroup. Both Refugee Crisis and Islamic fundamentalism might be characterized by negative stereotypes, resulting from the ingroup's expectation that immigrants and Muslims are violent and aggressive (Ngwayuh & Croucher, 2017).

These four types of threats describe intergroup threats, however, in the case of Climate Change, there is not any specific outgroup as it threatens the whole of humankind. The integrated threat theory does not comprehend the threats that are above groups such as the threats of Climate Change and Covid-19, therefore, the theory cannot answer how these global threats affect the trust in outgroups. Generally, the higher the perceived threat the lower the trust in outgroups (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), however, those threats that affect the whole of humanity shift the attitude towards outgroups in a positive direction (van Lange et al., 2017). In the case of perceived threats of Refugee Crisis and Islamic fundamentalism they might decrease the trust towards immigrants and Muslims, however, the perceived threat of Climate Change may influence the trust in outgroups positively.

1.3. Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories are among the many ways an individual can respond to a threat. Conspiracy theories are defined as an explanation or theory about a group of actors that secretly try to reach malevolent goals; conspiracies usually spread on social media and the Internet (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Swami et al., 2011). The study of Swami et al. (2011) suggests that conspiracy theories may begin individually, however, they cannot live on an individual level but they are shared by a group of people and serve group interests; and they always target another group such as economic, scientific, political, religious, or ideological groups (Nera et al., 2021; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). The arguments of conspiracy theories can vary from science, health, environment, immigration, and politics to international relations (Douglas et al., 2019). People who believe in conspiracies have a lower level of intelligence (Swami et al., 2011) education, and economic status (Douglas et al., 2019; Newheiser et al., 2011) and have limited access to accurate information (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

Goertzel (1994) argued that conspiracy mentality is part of the monological belief system thus often a conspiracy theory is a basis or the “evidence” of other conspiracy theories. Many studies pointed out that conspiracy theories are correlated with each other, therefore, believing in one conspiracy theory also supposes to accept others, which leads to the conclusion of conspiracy mentality (Douglas et al., 2019; Swami et al., 2011). This notion instead describes the phenomena as a general mindset and states that people who believe in conspiracy theories often ignore evidence, facts, scientific consensus, and rational thinking and trust unreliable information (Douglas et al., 2019; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018).

So far there is no typology of conspiracy theories due to the supposed one-dimensional construct. However, recently, Nera et al. (2021) introduced a possible differentiation between conspiracy theories, which may have various consequences. *Upward conspiracy theories* focus on dominant groups with high power; therefore, the conspiratorial believers think that the conspirators are for instance political parties or scientists who benefit from social problems such as wars and viruses. However, conspiratorial believers tend to perceive these groups as more powerful than they actually are. The *downward conspiracy theories* target vulnerable and less powerful minority groups such as immigrants; those who believe in downward conspiracies think that these discriminated minority groups are powerful. Therefore, both types of conspiracy beliefs attribute more power to the target group than it actually has. Nera et al. (2021) proposed the distinction between the two types of conspiracy theories based on social power which is defined as “asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations” (Magee & Galinsky, 2008, p. 361 as cited in Nera et al., 2021). They argued that downward conspiracy theories target groups whose “valued resources” are limited due to the negative attitude towards them,

while upward conspiracy theories blame people with large access to these resources. They found that the upward and downward conspiracy theories are positively correlated, however, the two types correlate differently with power challenging and conservatism. Downward conspiracy theories are correlated more positively with conservative ideology, and upward conspiracy theories are associated more with political extremism and with feelings of leadership breakdown, only the upward conspiracies have a U-shaped relation with political orientation, therefore upward conspiracy theories are more power challenging than downward conspiracies. They also found that political orientation affects the tendency for believing in upward or downward conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories prove to be appealing when they are perceived to fulfill epistemic, existential, and social motives. People are often not conscious of these psychological motives. *Epistemic motives* could be the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty. Crisis, uncertainty, and perceived threats increase the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). When *existential needs* are threatened people might be motivated to engage in conspiracy theories to feel that they regained control and psychological goods. The feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness that are often associated with crises, favor the development of conspiracy. *Social motives* are for instance the need for maintaining a positive self-image or for feeling special and important to others. Conspiracy theories can satisfy these needs by increasing the level of self-esteem. Conspiracies can also satisfy the need to feel positive about the ingroup. Conspiracy mentality may increase when individuals experience collective narcissism which refers to the belief that the ingroup's worth is not appraised enough by others. However, the likelihood of engaging in conspiracy theories only increases if the strive for a positive image of the ingroup is accompanied by the strive for a negative image of the outgroup. Conspiracy mentality is more prevalent among low-status social groups than high-status social groups because they try to explain their disadvantaged social status with conspiracy theories. These three psychological needs however are not satisfied by conspiracy theories; indeed, conspiracies may cause more disadvantages (Douglas et al., 2019).

Though conspiracy mentality has some benefits such as raising awareness on issues that otherwise would be not addressed (Douglas et al., 2019) and encouraging the government to be more transparent (Swami & Coles, 2010), it has more negative consequences than positive. Previous studies found that people watching movies that involve conspiracy theories would change their attitude, and they are more likely to believe the conspiracy theories that are presented during the movies after watching them than before (Butler et al., 1995; Mulligan & Habel, 2013).

As I mentioned above, political groups are often targeted by conspiracy theories.

Political events that increase individuals' political distrust, feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty, and unpredictability also increase the tendency to engage in conspiracy theorizing (Douglas et al., 2019). Conspiracy beliefs affect political affiliation and people have no confidence taking part in political actions such as vaccinating or voting (Douglas et al., 2015; Lewandowsky et al., 2013). Einstein and Glick (2013) found that exposure to conspiracy theories decreases the trust in government. Conspiracy mentality is also associated with engaging in violent collective actions, political extremism (Nera et al., 2021) and cynicism, supporting democracy, and a negative attitude towards authorities (Swami et al., 2011). Conspiracy theories also decrease the trust in outgroups. Conspiracies about Jewish people increase anti-Semitism (Kofta & Sedek, 2005), racism, and the negative attitude toward other ethnic groups such as Chinese and Israelis (Swami, 2012). Conspiracy theories, therefore, reinforce intergroup differences (Douglas et al., 2019) and in several cases, conspiracy mentality might result in prejudice towards outgroups (Pasek et al., 2014). Based on these, it can be assumed that though generally, the perceived threats of Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis predict higher trust in government, however, through conspiracy theories they decrease the trust. Any perceived threat directly promotes trust in government, but threats favor particularly conspiracy mentality, especially when individuals do not get any official explanation for the threats.

Another consequence of conspiracy theories is for instance a higher tendency for paranormal beliefs (Swami et al., 2011). Interestingly, the results of the study by Swami et al. (2010) showed that conspiracy mentality predicts low agreeableness, probably due to the feelings of suspicion and antagonism, and it also predicts higher openness to experience due to active imagination and curiosity for new ideas (Swami et al., 2011). Conspiracy theories are also associated with the decrease in civic engagement (Douglas et al., 2015), in aspiration for reducing the carbon footprint, and in job satisfaction, and the increase in turnover (Douglas & Leite, 2017).

Hofstadter (1966) argued that conspiracy mentality is a result of 'distorted' thinking (Swami et al., 2011). However, more recent studies found that believing in conspiracy theories may be conceived as a defense mechanism. When people face with uncertainty and lack of explanations for significant events they search for cognitive closure (Douglas et al., 2019; Marchlewska et al., 2017). The need for understanding external events stems from epistemic motivation. According to Franks et al. (2013, p.14 as cited in Douglas et al., 2019), conspiracy theories are "devices to cope with collective trauma".

1.4. System justification

Besides conspiracy theories, system justification can be another way to respond to threats. Justification is defined as the “legitimacy or support for another idea or some form of behaviour” (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p.1). People make justifications for social events, their attitudes and status, aggressive and discriminatory behaviors, the position of others, the discriminatory acts of ingroup members, and prevailing social conditions. System justification addresses the motive to legitimate the social status quo (Blasi & Jost, 2006). According to the System Justification Theory, people are motivated to trust in the political, social, and economic structures, and to justify the government’s fairness (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, 2018). System justification is a psychological, goal-directed process that can be often unconscious and out of control (Blasi & Jost, 2006; Jost, 2018; Jost & Banaji, 1994). The theory proposes that people can have system-justifying motives even if the actual political system is not beneficial for them or others, therefore both advantaged (e.g., higher status, upper class, Whites) and disadvantaged (e.g., lower status, lower class, ethnic minorities) people have system-justifying motives, however, since system justification favors mostly to the advantaged people, they adhere the most to the status quo (Blasi & Jost, 2006, Samson, 2018). Different factors can determine the strength of the system justification and the trust in government, for instance, threat, control loss (Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018), and challenge of the system (Jost, 2018). Individuals are more likely to perceive the system as legitimate if the negative outcomes of threats are inevitable (Kay et al., 2002). If the system is threatened, satisfaction with the status quo tends to increase, and people try to defend it through system justification (Jost et al., 2004; Jost, 2018). Supposedly, through system justification, people feel that the effect of perceived threats is decreased.

System justification has epistemic, existential, and relational motives, and according to the palliative function of system justifying ideology (Jost & Hunyady, 2002), the satisfaction of these needs promotes higher self-esteem and welfare. Therefore, engaging in system justification predicts better psychological well-being (Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018), and less distress, depression, and deprivation (Osborne & Sibley, 2013). Napier and Jost (2008) proposed that societal inequality is also positively related to system justification. They found that conservatives had higher life satisfaction in the years with higher societal inequality compared to years with lower inequality. In other words, system justification predicts better psychological well-being when people experience inequality because system justifying beliefs serve as a defense mechanism “by providing an ideological justification for daily observations of other people’s suffering” (Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018, p. 4).

As I mentioned earlier, system justification increases psychological well-being (Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018) and decreases the feeling of uncertainty (Jost & Banaji, 1994) that might result in less threat perception and therefore, individuals might have a higher level of trust in outgroups.

1.5. Common grounds of conspiracy theories and system justification, and their consequences to the trust in government and outgroups

Conspiracy mentality and system justification have the same motivational background; their motives are the fulfillment of epistemic, existential, and social needs such as the avoidance of uncertainty and crisis, dealing with the outgroup and protecting the ingroup, making sense of uncontrollable events, feeling protected and less powerless. These needs are usually the consequences of threats that favor especially developing conspiracy mentality and system justification (Jolley et al., 2017). Both can serve as a coping mechanism to deal with crises or threats such as Islamic fundamentalism, Refugee Crisis, and Climate Change. However, though they have the same motives they can affect trust in government and outgroups in different ways.

Based on previous studies, the trust in government and the trust in outgroups are different types of trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001, Newton, 2001). The former is an *institutional* or political form of trust, while the other one is *interpersonal* or intergroup trust. Institutional and interpersonal trust are highly correlated (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008); both types of trust are based on that relationships are “a form of risk management” (Liu et al., 2018, p.790). High-risk management may predict higher trust in interpersonal and institutional relations, while low-risk management may negatively affect these relationships. According to the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer Survey that assessed the trust in 28 countries, the trust in the basic institutions such as the government has decreased significantly in most of the participating countries. In addition, the General Social Survey found that in the US both institutional and interpersonal trust decreased consistently in the past decades (Samson, 2018).

Based on the previous chapter, it is not questionable that system justification is correlated positively with the trust in government to a large extent. People are motivated to perceive the political and societal system as fair, just, and legitimate, and to preserve the status quo regardless of their economic status, even at their costs, and often unconsciously (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Therefore, the higher the system justification, the higher the trust in government.

Intergroup or system threats such as Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis favor system justification (Jost et al., 2004), these threats are associated with prejudice and negative discrimination towards outgroups (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). When people face challenges of

the system (Jost, 2008), control loss, and feelings of powerlessness (Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018) they are more likely to engage in system-justifying beliefs. According to the *palliative function of ideology hypothesis*, system justifying beliefs may satisfy epistemic, existential, and relational needs that decrease people's threat perception and increase their sense of certainty resulting in psychological benefits such as a higher level of well-being, life satisfaction, and self-esteem (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018). According to previous studies, system justification may decrease the perception of intergroup discrimination (Major & Kaiser, 2017; McCoy & Major, 2007). Therefore, though intergroup threats may have a direct negative effect on the trust in outgroups, indirectly via system justifying they might decrease the negative attitude towards outgroups. This might be the result of a higher level of psychological well-being that affects the trust in outgroups positively because threat perception is reduced due to the feelings of regained power, certainty, and control.

More studies suggest that conspiracy theories have negative political consequences (Douglas et al., 2015, Einstein & Glick, 2013; Jolley et al., 2019). Conspiracies occur when people experience feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty, and unpredictability; and political events might increase these feelings (Douglas et al., 2019). Goertzel (1994) found a negative correlation between conspiracy theories and trust in government. Therefore, the higher the engagement in conspiracy theorizing the lower the trust in government.

Besides the decreasing trust in government, conspiracy theories have other negative social consequences. Conspiracy theorizing affects especially negatively intergroup relations. For instance, Jewish people are a common target of conspiracies (e. g. Jewish domination of the world). These theories result in negative discrimination toward Jewish people (Bilewicz et al., 2013) and anti-Semitism (de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012). Conspiracy theories provide a way to express prejudice towards the outgroups, as through conspiracy beliefs people target outgroups that are perceived as threatening to the ingroup's values and welfare (Campion-Vincent, 2005 as cited in Jolley et al., 2019). Jolley et al. (2019) found that conspiracy beliefs regarding immigrants increase the negative attitude towards them. They also found that through conspiracy theories the targeted group is not the only group that is affected negatively, but other uninvolved groups too, this is known as the *secondary transfer effect* (Pettigrew, 2009). Previous studies supported this result, they found that conspiracy beliefs about Jewish people predicted prejudice towards German, Russian (Kofta & Sedek, 2005), and Chinese people (Swami, 2012). However, the secondary transfer effect can shift the attitude in a positive direction too, the results of the study by Pettigrew (2009) showed that a positive experience with immigrants predicts a more positive attitude towards homosexual and homeless people.

It is important to emphasize, that conspiracy mentality predicts an overall distrust. If people have less trust in government, they may feel less powerful and protected which affects

their social relations, therefore they have less trust in outgroups also. Hence, there is no difference between the types of trust (institutional or interpersonal) in the case of conspiracy theories (van Prooijen et al., 2022). If the government is not perceived as a highly qualified institution that can "be relied on in times of need", people may experience a decreased sense of security that negatively affects the trust in outgroups (van Prooijen et al., 2022, p. 66). Conspiracy mentality predicts a generalized distrust resulting in negative societal outcomes that affect the interpersonal, within-group, and between-group relations. These negative consequences can be, for instance, lower cooperation, commitment, and prosocial behavior, and higher prejudice, intergroup conflict, polarization, and extremism (van Prooijen et al., 2022). In the UK conspiracies about institutions promote the development of conspiracy theories regarding Islamic fundamentalism, these conspiracies are called Islamophobic conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2018).

To sum up, conspiracy mentality and system justification have the same motives, threat perception favors both of them, and both function as a coping mechanism. System justification is associated with higher trust in government, and due to the increase in well-being and decrease in uncertainty, it may also predict higher trust in outgroups. Conspiracy mentality is associated with an overall distrust meaning that there is no difference between the trust in government and trust in outgroups. Therefore, the higher the conspiracy mentality is, the lower the trust in general.

II. Hypotheses

H1 Based on the literature perceived threat fosters conspiracy beliefs and system justification as both can satisfy one's existential motivation. Therefore, we suppose that any threat can facilitate conspiracy theory and system justification independently from the type of threat.

H2 Perceived threat increases the trust in government directly and decreases the trust towards outgroups in the case of Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis, however, the perceived threat of Climate Change shifts the attitude towards outgroups in a positive direction.

H3 The effect of threat to the trust in government is different through the conspiracy mentality and system justification. The conspiracy mentality will expectedly decrease the trust in government, while system justification will increase it.

H4 The effect of threat on trust in outgroups might be also different through the conspiracy mentality and system justification. Threat will expectedly decrease the trust in outgroups via conspiracy mentality but increase the trust in outgroups through system justification.

III. Method

3.1. Sample

N=463 Hungarian subjects participated in the Digital Influence Survey II: 2018 of whom 251 (54.3%) were females, 211 (45.7%) were males, and one participant did not indicate his/her gender. Participants' age ranged from 19.00 to 70.00 years ($M = 40$, $SD = 12.9$). The sample appeared relatively liberal ($M=6.12$, $SD=2.30$), 1.9% finished only elementary school, 22.3 % finished middle school, 33.5% graduated in high school and 42.2% had a tertiary degree.

3.2. Measures

System justification. System justification was assessed with a short version of the original System Justification Scale developed by Kay and Jost (2003). This version included four items (e.g. "In general, I find society to be fair," and "In general, the Hungarian political system operates as it should"). Participants indicated their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). The scale produced high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

Conspiracy beliefs. Conspiracy theorizing was measured by three items, chosen from the Generalized Conspiracy Belief Scale (Rose, 2017; e.g., "Many significant world events have occurred as a result of a conspiracy" and „Despite what the authorities say, large business and/or government routinely engage in sinister, secret activities in the name of profit"). Participants were asked to respond on scales ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$).

Perceived threats. Perceived threat was measured by three items correspond to three different type of threat. One item measured the perceived threat of Islamic fundamentalism

(„Islam fundamentalism is the greatest threat to peace and stability in the world today”), one measured the Climate Change („Climate Change and environmental destruction is the greatest threat to peace and stability in the world today”), and another one measured the Refugee Crisis („The Refugee Crisis is the greatest threat to peace and stability in the world today”). Participants indicated their agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*).

Trust in government and outgroups. The level of trust in the government was measured with three items of the Global Trust Inventory (Liu et al., 2018). Participants indicated the extent to which they had trust in the *national government*, in the *local government* and in the *prime minister of Hungary*. Each item was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*do not trust at all*) to 7 (*completely trust*). The three-item scale showed adequate internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$). The level of trust in outgroups was measured with four items from the Global Trust Inventory (Liu et al., 2018). Participants indicated their trust in people of another nationality, ethnicity or religion and people they disagree with about politics. The four items showed an adequate internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .835$).

Control Variables. We controlled for the effects of political orientation, national identification, trust in the government, age, gender, education. Political orientation was measured with one item (*On political issues, where would you place yourself on a scale of 0 to 10?*) rated on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (*conservative/right-leaning*) to 10 (*liberal/left-leaning*). Participants also indicated their gender, age and level of education.

IV. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

We ran a Correlation Matrix with the use of Spearman correlation to test the relationship between the measurement variables (Table 1).

Table 1. Correlation Matrix

	Islamic Fundamentalism	Climate Change	Refugee Crisis	System Justification	Conspiracy mentality	Political orientation	age	education	Trust in out-groups	Trust in government
Islamic Fundamentalism	—									
Climate Change	0.188 ***	—								
Refugee Crisis	0.689 ***	0.217 ***	—							
System Justification	0.279 ***	-0.034	0.288 ***	—						
Conspiracy mentality	0.280 ***	0.115 *	0.287 ***	-0.143**	—					
Political orientation	-0.137 **	0.137 **	-0.190 ***	-0.241***	-0.029	—				
age	0.102 *	0.082	0.074	0.011	0.091	0.015	—			
education	-0.126 **	-0.077	-0.188***	0.064	-0.097*	0.060	-0.114*	—		
Trust in out-groups	-0.054	0.124 **	-0.178***	0.239***	-0.080	0.090	0.073	0.140**	—	
Trust in government	0.343 ***	-0.035	0.294***	0.687***	-0.154***	-0.223***	0.053	0.021	0.313***	—
Mean	4.35	4.69	4.32	2.58	4.68	6.12	40.0	3.50	3.32	2.37
SD	1.74	1.68	1.80	1.39	1.35	2.30	12.9	1.31	1.12	1.50

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The results show that the three types of threat (Climate Change, Islamic fundamentalism, and Refugee Crisis) positively correlate. Moreover, all the three threats positively associate with conspiracy mentality and among them, Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis correlate positively with system justification. System justification correlates negatively with conspiracy mentality. Political orientation correlates negatively with Islamic fundamentalism, Refugee Crisis, and system justification, while it associates positively with the threat induced by Climate Change. Age associates positively with the threat induced by Islamic fundamentalism. Education is negatively associated with Islamic fundamentalism, Refugee Crisis, and conspiracy beliefs. Trust in outgroups correlates positively with Climate Change, system justification, and trust in government, and it correlates negatively with Refugee Crisis. Trust in government correlates positively with Islamic fundamentalism, Refugee Crisis, system justification, and correlates negatively with conspiracy mentality and political orientation.

4.2. Link between conspiracy mentality and system justification and perceived threat

Two linear regression analysis were run in separate to test the effect of the different type of threats on conspiracy mentality and system justification, while controlling participants' political orientation, age, gender, and education (Table 2).

Table 2. Effect of different types of threat on conspiracy mentality and system justification

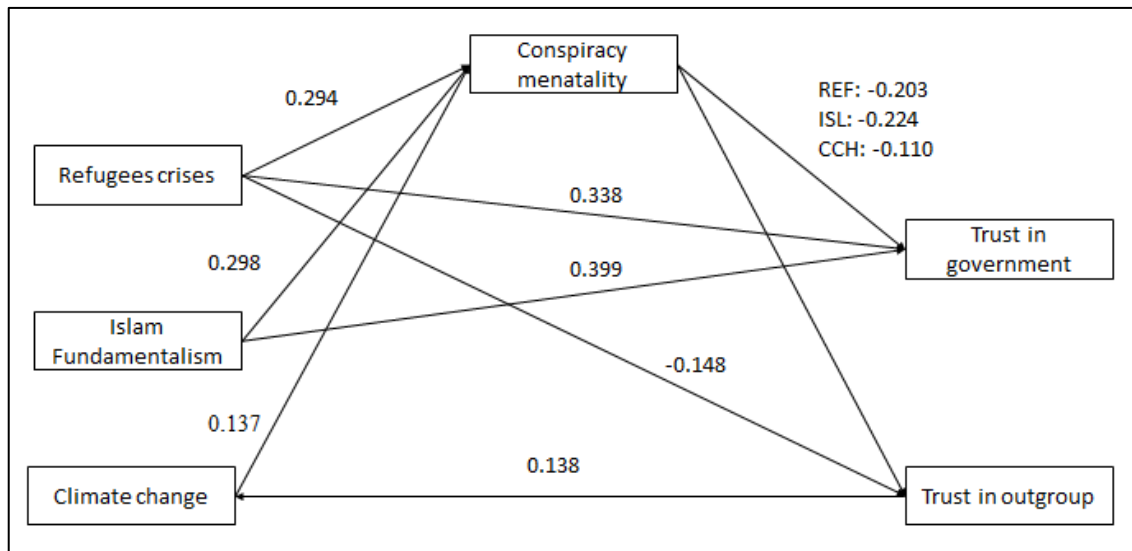
	CONSPIRACY MENTALITY				SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION			
	Beta	SE	t	p	Beta	SE	t	p
ISLfund	0.17	0.048	2.733	0.007	0.159	0.048	2.623	0.009
ClimateChange	0.06	0.037	1.297	0.195	-0.052	0.037	-1.157	0.248
RefugeeCrisis	0.148	0.048	2.320	0.021	0.188	0.048	3.043	0.002
PolOrientation	0.003	0.027	0.066	0.947	-0.009	0.005	-0.219	0.827
age	0.06	0.005	1.346	0.180	-0.188	0.027	-4.191	<.001
education	-0.07	0.047	-1.54	0.124	0.137	0.047	3,110	0.002
Gender (F-M)	0.08	0.123	0.882	0.378	-0.152	0.123	-1.716	0.087
	F(451,7)=8,28 p<0,001 R ² =0,114				F(451,7)=14,0 p<0,001 R ² =0,18			

The results show that threat indicated by Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis facilitate conspiracy mentality but not the threat induced by Climate Change. Similar results could be found considering system justification. After controlling the effect of age, political orientation, education, and gender subjective feeling of threat induced by Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis positively influence system justification, but not the threat induced by Climate Change. It is also visible that older people are less likely to justify the system, while higher education favour in it.

4.3. *Effect of threat on trust in government and outgroup*

A Series of mediation analyses was conducted to examine the mediation role of conspiracy mentality and system justification between the different types of threat and trust in government and outgroups. The result shows that threat perceived by Refugee Crisis facilitates trust in government ($\beta = 0.338$) and decreases the trust in outgroups ($\beta = -0.148$) directly, but through the conspiracy mentality it decreases the trust in government ($\beta = -0.06$ CI95% [-0,091- -0,028]). A similar result was found concerning the threat perceived from Islamic fundamentalism. We found that threat from Islamic fundamentalism increases the trust in government ($\beta = 0.399$) directly but through conspiracy mentality negatively affects the trust in government ($\beta = -0.334$ CI95% [-0.249 – -0.418]) and left intact the trust in outgroups ($p=n.s.$). It is interesting to note that the threat from Climate Change only marginally reduced trust in government ($p=0,06$) through conspiracy theories, but had a direct positive effect on trust in outgroups ($\beta = 0.138$) (see Figure 1.).

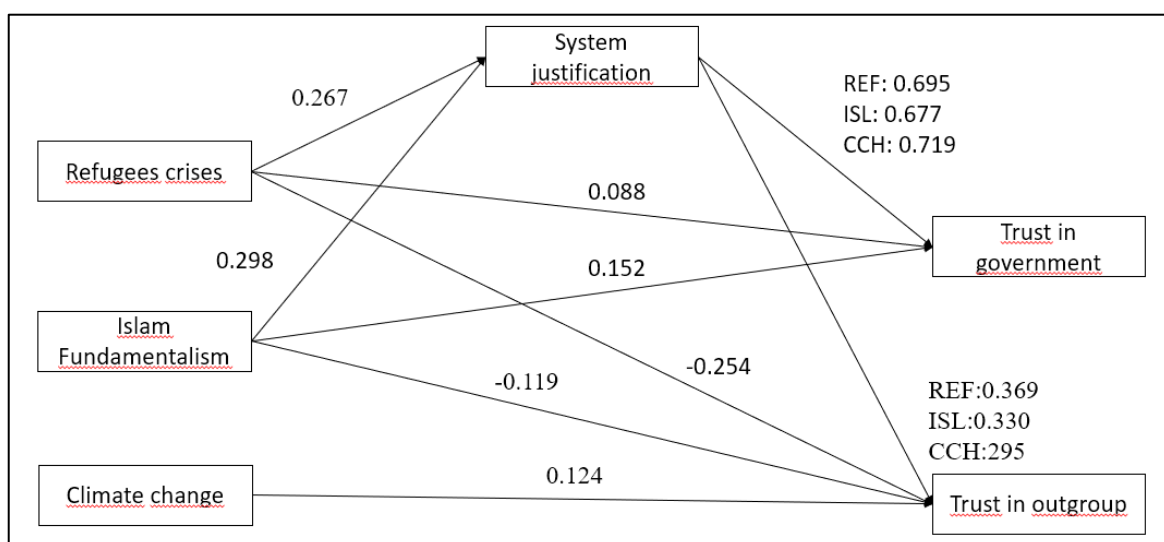
Figure 1. The mediation role of conspiracy mentality



Note. Political orientation was controlled

In the next series of mediation model, we examined the mediation role of system justification (see Figure 2.). We found that threat from Refugee Crisis has a negative direct effect on trust in outgroup ($\beta = -0.254$) and a positive direct effect on trust in government ($\beta = 0.088$), but through system justification threat from Refugee Crisis increase both the trust in government ($\beta = 0.191$) and in the outgroups ($\beta = 0.101$). A similar pattern was found concerning the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. It facilitates trust in government in a direct way ($\beta = 0.152$) but negatively affects the trust in outgroups ($\beta = -0.119$). However, through system justification, it increases the trust both in the government ($\beta = 0.181$) and in the outgroups ($\beta = 0.088$). The threat perceived from Climate Change has no effect on system justification nor on trust in government. However, it has a direct positive effect on trust in outgroups ($\beta = 0.124$).

Figure 2. The mediation role of system justification



V. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to examine how and to what extent perceived threats (Islamic fundamentalism, Refugee Crisis, and Climate Change) affect the trust in government and outgroups through conspiracy mentality and system justification.

The first hypothesis suggested that any type of threat promotes conspiracy theorizing and system justification. This hypothesis was assumed based on that threat perception favors the occurrence of conspiracy mentality and system justification (Jolley et al., 2017). Congruent with our expectations, the results showed that all three threats affect directly and positively the conspiracy mentality. Therefore, the higher the perceived threat the higher the engagement in conspiracy beliefs. Though, the perceived threat of Climate Change does not affect the conspiracy mentality as much as the threats indicated by Refugee Crisis and Islamic fundamentalism. Refugee Crisis and Islamic fundamentalism also promote system justification, hence, the higher these threats are perceived as threatening the higher the motivation for system justification. However, Climate Change does not affect the system justification at all. Therefore, the first hypothesis is confirmed only partially as system justification is not facilitated by all types of threats. This result is probably due to that Climate Change is not an intergroup threat but rather a global threat that affects the whole of humanity. While Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis are intergroup threats that might threaten the political and societal system and status quo, and according to the literature (Jost & Banaji, 1994), system justification is predicted by system threats.

The second hypothesis assumed that all threats increase the trust in government directly; and the threat induced by Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis predicts lower trust in outgroups, while Climate Change facilitates the trust in outgroup members. The results indicated that Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis have a positive direct effect on the trust in government, however, Climate Change does not affect the trust in government. The reason behind this might be that Climate Change is a global threat and the government has no influence on it, while Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis are system threats that can be affected by the government. Furthermore, we found that the threat induced by Refugee Crisis and Islamic fundamentalism directly decreases the trust in the outgroups. However, the effect of Islamic fundamentalism on the trust in outgroups is less significant than the effect of Refugee Crisis, and it left intact the trust in outgroups in the mediation analysis of conspiracy mentality. Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis are intergroup threats and they might be perceived as threatening to the ingroup's welfare, culture, religion, and safety, hence they promote a negative attitude towards outgroups (Stephen & Stephen, 2000). The perceived threat of Islamic fundamentalism might have less effect on the trust in outgroups because the sample was

Hungarian. Hungary is not so influenced by Islamic fundamentalism, therefore, Hungarian people do not perceive it as a threat, while they have personal experiences with Refugee Crisis thus, they perceive it as more threatening than Islamic fundamentalism. The results also showed that the perceived threat of Climate Change affects the trust in outgroups positively. Climate Change increases the trust in outgroups because it is not an intergroup threat but it affects the whole of humanity that predicts a positive attitude towards outgroups (van Lange et al., 2017). Therefore, the higher the perceived threat of Refugee Crisis and Islamic fundamentalism the higher the trust in government and the lower the trust in outgroups, and the higher the perceived threat of Climate Change the higher the trust in outgroups. The second hypothesis is also confirmed partially as not all threats facilitate trust in government.

The third hypothesis presumed that the effect of threats through conspiracy mentality would decrease the trust in government while system justification would increase it. We found that the perceived threats of Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis decrease the trust in government through conspiracy mentality and increase it through system justification. Conspiracy mentality is a moderator in this case because it changes the direct positive effect into an indirect negative effect. Conspiracy theories are associated with a general distrust (van Prooijen et al., 2022) and this explains why the direct positive effect turns into a negative effect via conspiracy mentality. Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis facilitate the trust in government through system justification because they are system threats, and the higher the system threats, the higher the engagement in system justification (Jost et al., 2004) which predicts higher trust in government (Jost & Banaji, 1994). The perceived threat of Climate Change only marginally reduced the trust in government through conspiracy mentality, and through system justification, it has no effect at all. This might be the result of that system justification is strongly associated with trust in government (Jost & Banaji, 1994), and it was mentioned already that a lack of correlation was found between Climate Change and system justification due to that Climate Change is not a system threat, rather a global threat, and the government has no influence on it. Therefore, the third hypothesis is conformed as the perceived threats decrease the trust in government indirectly through conspiracy mentality, and except the Climate Change, they increase the trust in governments indirectly via system justification. Based on the literature, these results were not surprising, even though conspiracy mentality and system justification highly correlate, they have different consequences on the trust in government (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

The fourth hypothesis suggested that the effect of perceived threats on trust in outgroups would also be different via conspiracy mentality and system justification, similarly to the previous hypothesis, conspiracy mentality might decrease the trust, while system justification might increase it. We found that through conspiracy mentality the perceived threats of Islamic

fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis left intact the trust in outgroups. Based on the theoretical background, this result is surprising because conspiracy mentality predicts a generalized distrust, therefore as it decreased the trust in government it should have decreased the trust in outgroups too (van Prooijen et al., 2022). The lack of indirect effect might be the result of that conspiracy mentality was measured only with upward conspiracy items, therefore it assessed conspiracy mentality regarding the authorities. While downward conspiracies that would target refugees and Muslims were not assessed. However, the results showed that through system justification the perceived threats of Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis indirectly affect the trust in outgroups positively. In this case, the system justification is the moderator as it changes the direct negative effect into an indirect positive effect. System justification may change the negative attitude into a positive attitude because it enhances the well-being of individuals (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018) by decreasing the perceived unfairness of the system and the feelings of uncertainty (Jost & Banaji, 1994), thus they have higher trust in outgroups. Therefore, the hypothesis regarding the trust in outgroups conformed only partially because through conspiracy mentality threats do not decrease the trust in outgroups, while through system justification the effect of perceived threats is positive.

In addition, we assumed that the type of the outgroup would influence the effect of the threats. In the case of conspiracy theories, we found that Islamic fundamentalism has neither direct nor indirect effect on the trust in any outgroup. Refugee Crisis has a direct negative effect on the trust in any outgroup, but through conspiracy mentality, it does not affect the trust. Climate Change has a positive direct effect on the trust in every outgroup but does not affect the trust through conspiracy theories. In the case of system justification, Climate Change has a positive direct effect on the trust in the outgroup and has no effect through system justification. Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis have a negative direct effect on the trust in any outgroup, however through system justification the trust in the outgroup increases. Therefore, the type of the outgroup does not influence the effect of threat on the trust in the outgroup neither through conspiracy theories nor through system justification. However, through system justification, people have a higher trust in outgroups.

VI. Conclusion

Among the perceived threats Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis have almost the same effect on conspiracy mentality, system justification, and trust in government and outgroups. While the perceived threat of Climate Change affects conspiracy mentality, system justification, and trust in government and outgroups differently. Therefore, the effect of perceived threats on the trust in government and outgroups depends on the type of the threats (intergroup or global) and whether the threat perception happens through system justification or conspiracy mentality. From the present research, it can be seen that the integrated threat theory differentiates only intergroup threats such as Islamic fundamentalism and Refugee Crisis, however, the results indicate that global threats like Climate Change and Covid-19 require another approach to understand their consequences on conspiracy mentality, system justification, and trust in government and outgroups, therefore, researchers should pay more attention to the integration of global threats.

VII. Limitations

It is important to acknowledge some limitations of the current research. Based on the study of Nera et al., 2021, conspiracy theories can be differentiated according to *upward* or *downward* conspiracies. However, in the present study conspiracy mentality was measured only with items regarding upward conspiracy beliefs (e.g., „Despite what the authorities say, large business and/or government routinely engage in sinister, secret activities in the name of profit”), therefore the questionnaire assessed only the conspiracy beliefs regarding authorities, while downward conspiracy beliefs were not measured. Therefore, the results indicated that Refugee Crisis has no effect via conspiracy mentality on the trust in outgroups. However, based on the literature, a negative indirect effect was expected because conspiracy mentality is associated with a generalized distrust (van Prooijen et al., 2022).

Another important limitation of the study was that trust in outgroups was measured by items regarding people of another nationality, ethnicity, or religion and with different political orientations. However, other nationalities and ethnicities are not necessarily outgroups.

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IX. Appendix 1*System Justification Scale*

Items
1. Összeségében igazságosnak tartom a társadalmat.
2. Összeségében Magyarország politikai rendszere úgy működik, ahogy kellene neki.
3. Magyarországon mindenkinek van esélye arra, hogy gazdag és boldog legyen.
4. Magyarország társadalma úgy épül fel, hogy mindenki azt kapja, ami neki jár.

X. Appendix 2

Generalized Conspiracy Belief Scale

Items
1. Ha a nagyobb képet nézzük, könnyen látható, hogy sok látszólag nem összefüggő esemény egy olyan nagyobb terv része, melyet nagyhatalmú emberek titokban irányítanak.
2. A világ eseményeinek jelentős része egy összeesküvés következtében történt.
3. A hatóságok hivatalos álláspontja ellenére, nagy üzleti és/vagy állami szervek a profit érdekében rendszeresen követnek el gonosz dolgokat.

XI. Appendix 3*Threat*

Items
1. Az iszlám fundamentalizmus fenyegeti a legjobban a világbékét napjainkban.
2. A klímaváltozás fenyegeti a legjobban a világbékét napjainkban.
3. A bevándorlás fenyegeti a leginkább a világbékét napjainkban.