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Relationship between Collective Victimhood and Defensive Strategies: Worldviews, Conspiracy Theories and System Justification

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The current study explores the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between collective victimhood beliefs and defensive strategies, including conspiracy theory conditioned on temporality and system justification. Drawing on a sample of 223 participants, the study distinguishes between historical and comparative victimhood beliefs and examines the mediating role of group-level worldviews – specifically distrust, perceived injustice, and vulnerability. Using path analysis, the findings reveal that historical victimhood beliefs are more strongly associated with defensive strategies compared to comparative victimhood beliefs, emphasizing the role of cultural and historical context in shaping these effects. Distrust emerged as a dominant mediator for historical conspiracy theories, while perceived injustice mediated the effect of historical victim beliefs on contemporary conspiracy theories. Notably, vulnerability did not mediate conspiracy theories but was linked to system justification through a negative association. These results underscore the nuanced interplay between collective victim beliefs, worldviews, and defensive strategies, shedding light on the socio-political implications of historical traumas in intergroup relations and public discourse.

Key words: historical victimhood beliefs, worldviews, conspiracy theory, system justification

Despite the growing interest in how people perceive and interpret ingroup victimization, the role and impact of other beliefs beyond comparative victim beliefs – a quantitative and qualitative comparison of victimization – have only recently begun to receive attention (Jeong & Vollhardt, 2021; Vollhardt et al., 2021). Szabó et al. (2022) argue that the rapid and broad proliferation of the concept of comparative victimhood beliefs has significantly limited the understanding of the phenomenon in both content and complexity.

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Collective victimhood, resulting from a single or series of traumatic events experienced by a group throughout its history, is referred to as historical victimhood (Schori-Eyal et al., 2014). It shapes the worldview through which individuals or groups perceive and interpret the world around them (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003). However, the nature of this worldview remains largely unexplored with some exceptions (e.g., Klar, 2016). Even less is known about its connection to defensive strategies, such as conspiracy theories or system justification, which are often intertwined with collective victimhood. The present study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of these processes.

Collective Victim Beliefs and Their Extension

Collective victimhood refers to a shared set of beliefs about being victimized, which forms the basis for constructing a common reality and acts as a lens through which a group interprets information and makes sense of the present (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Imhoff et al., 2017). The group often places victimization at the center of its identity (see chosen trauma in Volkan, 2021), and the sense of superiority often arises from the group's perception of moral high ground as a victim (Bar-Tal et al., 2009).

Collective victimhood beliefs can vary depending on how group members construe the ingroup's victimization concerning other groups (Noor et al., 2017). Most empirical research on collective victim beliefs has focused on comparative victim beliefs (Noor et al., 2017), emphasizing the uniqueness or degree of ingroup suffering, i.e. exclusive victimhood (Vollhardt, 2012), or highlighting the similarities of hardships, thereby thinking inclusively about the suffering of other groups, i.e. inclusive victimhood (Vollhardt, 2012). Comparative victim beliefs have been examined in several studies, stressing the divergent impacts and functions of these beliefs. The findings indicate that exclusive victimhood tends to have negative consequences, while inclusive victimhood is associated with positive outcomes (for more details see Adelman et al., 2016; Shnabel et al., 2013; Szabó et al., 2020; Vollhardt, 2015; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008).

Szabó (2020) argues that most of our knowledge about collective victimhood comes from the context of intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Vollhardt, 2009; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015), which may not be relevant in other historical, political, or cultural contexts. For example, Szabó et al. (2022) in a Hungarian context and Jeong and Vollhardt (2021) in a South Korean sample found that comparative victim beliefs were less pronounced or even absent. Instead, other beliefs, such as the invisibility of victimization, feelings of betrayal, or pride stemming from suffering, were more prevalent in the Hungarian context, while solidarity in coping with victimhood and ingroup resistance to oppression were more commonly observed in the South Korean sample. The findings suggest that the theoretical framework should be reconsidered within a broader context exploring other victim beliefs and their effect (Szabó, 2020; Vollhardt et al., 2021, 2023). The present study seeks to contribute to this effort, in part, by examining the relationship between, and the impact of, the context-specific historical and comparative victimhood beliefs.

Collective Victimhood and Worldviews

Groups develop core beliefs or worldviews grounded in collective memories, particularly following traumas, which significantly shape their present orientation and future direction (Bar-Tal, 2000). For instance, Bar-Tal and Antebi (1992) argued that the long history of persecutions and expulsions experienced

by the Jewish population fostered a siege mentality, a widely shared belief that other groups have highly malevolent intentions toward the ingroup. This phenomenon, however, is not unique to Jewish communities but is commonly associated with collective traumatic experience, particularly when exclusive victimhood is emphasized (Schori-Eyal et al., 2017; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015).

In addition to perceiving the world as a hostile environment, which is accompanied by a high degree of distrust, victimized groups often interpret the traumatic event as "undeserved, unfair, and unjust" (Bar-Tal et al., 2009, p. 234). This sense of injustice, another key belief associated with collective victimhood, often leads the groups in question to interpret subsequent negative actions by other groups as unfair or acts of mistreatment (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003). A traumatic experience profoundly disrupts a group's self-perception and instils doubts about its survival. This often leads to a heightened sensitivity to future threats, and the amplified perception of potential danger can become a defining aspect of the group's worldview, referred to as vulnerability (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003). It is typically accompanied by a strong sense of uncertainty about the future, leading to caution and defensiveness. In response, the group may take steps to enhance its security, such as reinforcing boundaries, forming alliances, or advocating for protection (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Eidelson, 2009).

Victimized groups often hold these beliefs (i.e., distrust, injustice, and vulnerability) as central and may attribute high confidence to them (Bar-Tal, 2000). Centrality implies that these beliefs are highly accessible – partially by memory policy – and are considered when making decisions. However, the impact of these beliefs depends on both the number of group members who share these beliefs and their influence. The larger the group or the greater the influence of even a single member who holds these beliefs, the stronger the overall effect of them. It is also important to note that centrality of beliefs is contingent on the maintaining mechanisms (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992) such as education (e.g., László, 2013) or political discourse (e.g., McNeill et al., 2017). Politicians can trigger beliefs stemming from past traumatic experiences by employing narratives of historical suffering in order to mobilize public support, defend national interests, or justify foreign policy decisions (Homer-Dixon, 1999, as cited in Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). For example, Kalhousová et al. (2024) found that Polish and Czech policy-makers justified their support for Ukraine by emphasizing their own historical traumas (i.e., Soviet and Nazi occupation), and the support was adjudicated more by referring to their own traumas than by sympathy for Ukraine.

Conspiracy Theory and System Justification as Two Defensive Strategies

Any threat that incorporates the potential for death and lack of control will trigger proximal reactions associated with heightened vigilance and anxiety and distal defensive strategies to lower anxiety and reestablish agency (Jonas et al., 2014). The defensive strategies may include behaviors or thoughts such as endorsing conspiracy theories, in-group favoritism, or a higher level of system justification (Jutzi et al., 2020). Defensive strategies may offer a direct solution to the threat at hand but can also merely serve as a palliative response that directs the group away from it.

The endorsement of conspiracy theories is particularly prevalent during periods of social crises or rapid social change when uncertainty and ambiguity dominate the situation (Kofta & Sedek, 2005; Petrović et al., 2019; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). In such

contexts, individuals seek meaning (Sullivan et al., 2010), while simultaneously gaining a sense of safety and agency (Douglas et al., 2017; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015). Conspiracy theories arising from intergroup conflict have the potential to become powerful historical narratives that are transmitted across generations, shaping how individuals remember and interpret events (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Recent studies found that memories of historical trauma and the sense of collective victimhood can fuel conspiracy thinking (Bilewicz et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2010; Pantazi et al., 2022; Uscinski, 2018). Bilewicz (2022) argues that conspiracy theories naturally accompany collective trauma and have adaptive value in overcoming the identity threat caused by trauma. Via their social identity function, conspiracy theories provide explanations for incomplete or unsatisfactory present or past intergroup conflicts aimed at redressing perceived disadvantages faced by the ingroup (Bilewicz et al., 2019; Bilewicz & Stefaniak, 2013; Douglas et al., 2019; Krekó, 2015; Swami, 2012; van Prooijen, 2024).

It is well documented in the literature that individuals with a sense of collective victimhood (particularly exclusive victimhood) are more prone to endorse conspiracy theories related to present intergroup conflicts (e.g., Nelson et al., 2010; Šrol & Čavojová, 2024). Additionally, these individuals may also be more inclined to endorse conspiracy theories about past events, contributing to a stronger continuity in the nation's victimhood self-concept. To our knowledge, no study has yet examined the relationship between collective victimization and the acceptance of historical conspiracy theories (i.e., those related to historical events) and contemporary conspiracy theories (i.e., those concerning current intergroup conflicts).

Another type of defensive strategy that is significantly more prevalent under threat is defending the legitimacy of any social system, whether concrete (like family or institutions) or abstract (like national identity or norms) (Hadarics & Kende, 2023; Jost et al., 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost & Kende, 2020). Like conspiracy theories, system justification exerts a palliative function (Jost & Hunyady, 2003), helping individuals navigate and make sense of their social environment, secure certainty, and cope with external threats (Hennes et al., 2012). Ethnic groups that have endured historical traumas involving loss or threat to sovereignty and territory, such as in the case of Hungary[1], may perceive their survival uncertain and feel under siege. This perception can give rise to a persistent and generalized vigilance towards other groups (Hirschberger, 2018), contributing to the heightening and tightening of national borders and stronger ethnocentrism (Hiers et al., 2017), and the justification of institutional and national systems (Liu et al., 2021; Liu & Hilton, 2005). In a recent study (Vincze et al., 2021), we found that Hungarian participants, who exclusively selected negative events from the last 100 years as the most significant historical events, were more inclined to endorse conspiracy theories and engage in system justification than those with a more diverse perspective on the noteworthy events. These results are consistent with the literature. However, the link between collective victimhood and defensive strategies was only implied since collective victimhood was not measured in our

[1] Hungarian history is characterized by significant territorial losses and threats to sovereignty. Events or periods such as the Ottoman occupation following the defeat of the Battle of Mohács (1526), the integration into the Habsburg Monarchy (1699), and the huge territorial reductions mandated by the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which stripped Hungary of two-thirds of its land and 3.5 million of its population. These events, compounded by Soviet domination after World War II, have left enduring marks on Hungary's national identity and geopolitical concerns, particularly regarding Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries.

study. Furthermore, the underlying psychological mechanism through which collective victimhood facilitates defensive strategies is unclear.

The Purpose of the Current Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the link between collective victimhood beliefs and defensive mechanisms, namely the endorsement of conspiracy theories and system justification. Drawing on the existing literature, we hypothesize that people with stronger collective victimhood beliefs are more likely to feel general distrust toward outgroups, perceive outgroups' actions as unjust and find the ingroup's current state vulnerable (H1). We suggest that the link between the sense of collective victimhood (historical and exclusive victim beliefs) and the defensive strategies (i.e., conspiracy theory and system justification) will be mediated by perceived vulnerability, perceived injustice, and distrust as specific worldviews stemming from the collective traumatic experiences (H2) (see Figure 1). We also want to know how comparative and historical collective victimhood beliefs relate to each other and defensive strategies.

Methods

Sample

Two hundred and twenty-three subjects (66 males and 157 females) participated in the study. Data were collected in 2021, online, in part using snowball sampling, and in university classes for course credit. The average age of the participants was 32.8 years (*SD* = 13.7) with a range between 18 and 76 years. 49.3% of the sample had tertiary degrees and 38.2% had finished high school. The sample showed a slightly liberal political orientation (*M* = 6.21, *SD* = 2.34). 13% of the participants would have voted for the governing party, 47.1% for the opposition party, and 39.9% did not know or would not have voted if the national election had taken place on the following Sunday.

The required sample size was determined by computing the estimated statistical power with a conservative approach (RMSEA = 0.08, power = .08, *df* = 39, alpha = 0.05) using the semPower package for R (Moshagen & Erdfelder, 2016). The analysis indicated the total required sample size to be 111; thus, our study was adequately powered.

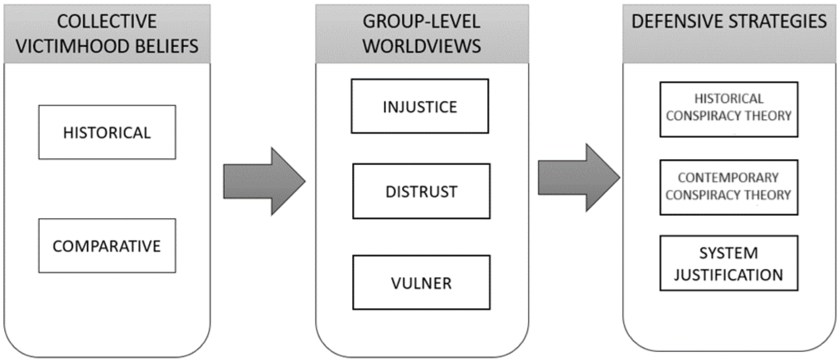


Figure 1 Conceptual model.

The United Ethical Review Committee for Research in Psychology (EPKEB) approved the study with reference number 2021-103.

Measures

Historical and contemporary conspiracy theories were measured by **s**even items, which were formulated as an alternative explanation for some unique social, historical, or political event directed at the past (historical conspiracy theory, e.g., "Clemenceau, the Prime Minister of France, did everything to put the Hungarians in the most unfavorable position during the Trianon peace negotiations, in order to take revenge on his daughter-in-law of Hungarian descent, who had a strained relationship with his son.") or the present (contemporary conspiracy theory: "The European Union deliberately and gradually blocks Hungarian legislation to undermine the sovereignty of the Hungarian nation."). The conspirators were outgroups (other nations or supranational institutes) or their representatives in all the items. Respondents were asked to indicate the probability of each conspiracy theory on a scale of 0-100%. They were able to provide values within a 10% range, accompanied by a textual description (e.g., 10% – highly unlikely, 50% – do not know, 90% – highly likely). Item-total correlations for both dimensions (past and present) were above .4, except one present conspiracy item (.208) ["Russia secretly supports terrorists in Syria, thereby encouraging immigration, as they aim to weaken the political and economic power of European Union member states (including Hungary)."], which was deleted. The final questionnaire consisted of six items, divided equally between past and present conspiracy theories. The two-dimensional structure of the questionnaire showed a better fit across the indices (χ^2 = 25.88, *df* = 8, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.10, 90% CI [0.059 – 0.144], $p = 0.026$, SRMSEA = 0.037) compared to the one-dimensional model (χ^2 = 53.70, *df* = 9, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.15, 90% CI [0.112 – 0.189], $p < 0.001$, SRMSEA = 0.058), indicating the temporal dimension of conspiracy theories as meaningful. Both subscales showed good internal consistency (for present conspiracy theories, ω = .890; for past conspiracy theories, ω = .709).

Collective victimhood beliefs were partially measured by two exclusive (e.g., "No other nation in Central and Eastern Europe has suffered as much as the Hungarians"), two inclusive victimhood (e.g., "Other nations in Central and Eastern Europe have suffered as much as the Hungarians") and two centrality items (e.g., 'I think it is important to keep the history of the ordeals of the Hungarians in our memory and pass it on to future generations") derived from the study of Szabó et al. (2023). We added further self-developed items that measure additional victimhood beliefs specific to the Central and Eastern European region. Based on Szabó's (2020) suggestion, we formulated items (two items for each dimension) concerning abandonment (e.g., "Over the centuries, the West has abandoned Hungary several times."), pride in suffering (e.g., "The suffering of the Hungarian past made the nation great.") and invisibility (e.g., "Other people do not know how much suffering the Hungarians have had to endure over the centuries.") as the most salient victimhood beliefs in relation to Hungarian historical traumas. Subjects were asked to indicate their agreement with the items on a 7-point scale ranged between 1 ("completely disagree") and 7 ("completely agree").

We conducted an explanatory factor analysis on the twelve-item extended questionnaire using maximum likelihood extraction with oblimin rotation. The KMO value (.902) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (χ^2 =1367.4,

df = 66, *p* < 0.001) indicated that the questionnaire was suitable for factor analysis, which has yielded three interpretable factors (Table 1) and together explained 58% of the variance. We called the first factor *historical victimhood beliefs* due to the exclusive loading of the abandonment and invisibility items that characterize Hungarian historical grievances. The second factor was composed of the pride-in-suffering and centrality items, which mark the importance of past suffering and its centrality to national self-concept.

Table 1 *Exploratory factor structure of Collective Victimhood Questionnaire*

ITEM	FACTOR 1 (historical)	FACTOR 2 (centrality)	FACTOR 3 (comparative)
(ABAND2) When Hungary needed help, no one came to our aid.	.850		
(INVIS1) Apart from us, other people do not know how much suffering the Hungarians have endured over the centuries.	.762		
(ABAND1) Over the centuries, the West has abandoned Hungary several times.	.679		
(INVIS2) An outside observer can never know what ordeals we Hungarians have had to go through.	.671		
(PRIsuf2) We have lost countless battles throughout history, but we became stronger.		.878	
(PRisuf1) The suffering of the Hungarians made the nation great.		.683	
(CENT1) I think it is important to keep the history of the ordeals of the Hungarians in our memory and pass it on to future generations.		.444	
(CENT2) When I think about what it means to be Hungarian, I am often reminded of the sufferings our people have endured throughout history.		.322	
(INC2) Other central and Eastern European countries have suffered as much as the Hungarians.			.761
(INC1) Apart from a few obvious differences, the grievances suffered by other ethnic groups in Central and Eastern Europe are similar to those suffered by Hungarians.			.679
(EXC1) Other country in Central and Eastern Europe has suffered as much as the Hungarians.	.413		-.508
(EXC2) Although every story of suffering is different, the Hungarian story is unique.		.419	-.461

Therefore, we termed this factor *centrality*. The third factor included exclusive and inclusive items, measuring *comparative victimhood beliefs*. All three factors demonstrated good reliability: comparative victimhood beliefs (ω = .825), centrality (ω = .790), and historical victimhood beliefs (ω = .856). We excluded the centrality dimension from further analysis because it measures the importance of victimhood, reflecting a more evaluative aspect, whereas our primary focus is on victim beliefs.

Group-level worldview. We utilized three dimensions from IGBI (Individual and Group Belief Inventory) (Eidelson, 2002) to examine the respondent's group-level worldview adapted to Hungarian by Mayer (2019). Each dimension is composed of three items: distrust denotes presumed hostility of other groups (e.g., "I think Hungary would do better not to trust others"), injustice describes the perceived unjust treatment by other groups (e.g., "I think other countries are often unfair to Hungary"); finally, vulnerability represents the perception of internal or external danger that threatens the ingroup (e.g., "I believe that the most important values for Hungarians are under threat."). Subjects were asked to indicate their agreement with the items on a 7-point scale ranged between 1 ("completely disagree") and 7 ("completely agree"). All dimensions showed acceptable internal reliability (ω = .827, and ω = .870, and ω = .633, respectively).

Conspiracy mentality was assessed by the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) (Bruder et al., 2013), which measures a general conspiracy propensity with five items (e.g., "There are so many important things happening in the world that are hidden from people") and the person estimates the probability of each item on a scale from 0% (not at all likely) to 100% (entirely likely). The questionnaire was translated into Hungarian by the independent political research institute Political Capital and has been used repeatedly on a representative sample. McDonald's ω = .864 indicates an excellent level of internal confidence.

System justification was measured by the shortened version of the General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003) adapted to Hungarian by Berkics (2009). The scale assesses the extent to which people consider the general system fair, legitimate, and necessary. Responses were indicated on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree). The four-item scale showed excellent internal consistency (ω = .826).

Control variables. We controlled for the effects of political orientation and national identification. Political orientation was measured with one item ("On political issues, where would you place yourself on a scale of 1 to 10") rated on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (conservative/right-leaning) to 10 (liberal/left-leaning). National identification was measured with two four-item scales (Roccas et al., 2008), adapted to Hungarian by Szabó and László (2014). The scales measure two different modes of identification: glorification (ω = .814; e.g., "Other nations can learn a lot from us Hungarians") and attachment (ω = .857; e.g., "Being Hungarian is an important part of my identity").

Data Analysis

All analyses were performed using JASP (JASP Team, 2024) and R Core Team (R Core Team, 2017). We tested whether the assumption of normality was met (Mardia, 1970). Mardia's multivariate skewness (b = 165.28, p < .001) indicated a non-normal distribution of the data, while kurtosis (b = -0.60, p = 0.55) did not show significant deviation from normality. A bivariate Spearman correlation analysis was conducted to explore the re-

lationships between variables, with a particular focus on examining the association between self-developed conspiracy theories (i.e., contemporary and historical conspiracy theories) and conspiracy mentality to assess construct validity. We used a multiple linear regression analysis to test the independent predictability of collective victimhood beliefs (i.e., historical and comparative) and group-level worldviews (i.e., vulnerability, distrust, and injustice) on defensive strategies (i.e., historical and contemporary conspiracy theories and system justification), which also provided a basis for further path analysis. Finally, the mediating role of group-level worldviews between collective victimization beliefs and defensive strategies was explored through path analysis. The R Package Lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) was used for model estimation. We utilized a Diagonally Weighted Least Squares estimation method with robust correction (WLSM) for the path analysis due to the small sample size and the non-normally distributed data (see Li, 2021). The mean-variance scaled adjusted (Satorra-Bentler) approach was used to find the robust standard error of the estimated path coefficients. The goodness of fit between the theoretical model and the data-generated model was assessed by chi-square statistic, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), which indicates satisfactory fit when < 0.08, as well as other incremental indices largely independent of the sample size: the noncentrality based comparative fit index (CFI) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA); for the CFI, the reference value is 0.95 for a satisfactory fit and 0.90 for an acceptable model, and the RMSEA, value of up to 0.08 are still considered to indicate reasonable model fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1992) and values between 0.08 and 0.10 are considered to reveal mediocre fit (MacCallum et al., 1996).

Results

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations (Spearman) between the variables. As expected, both historical and contemporary conspiracy theories moderately correlated with the conspiracy mentality and displayed a moderate positive association with the collective victimhood beliefs (both historical and comparative). Group-level worldviews such as vulnerability, distrust and injustice positively correlated with general (CMQ) and specific conspiracy theories (both historical and contemporary) and collective victimhood beliefs (both historical and comparative). System justification also demonstrated a positive association with both types of collective victimhood beliefs and both types of conspiracy theories, as well as distrust and perception of injustice within the group-level worldviews. However, it is negatively correlated with a conspiracy mentality, perceived vulnerability and political orientation. National identity (both glorification and attachment) positively correlated with all main variables except for the vulnerability worldview (no significant correlation). Both types of national identification display a negative correlation with political orientation, (indicating that a higher level of national identification is associated with a more conservative and right-leaning political orientation), while only glorification has a positive association with conspiracy mentality (CMQ). Political orientation is negatively associated with all main variables except vulnerability. Age showed a positive correlation with both historical and contemporary conspiracy theories, historical collective victimhood beliefs, attachment and distrust worldviews. All correlations aligned with the literature and our expectations. The negative correlation between system justification and conspiracy mentality can be at-

Table 2 *Descriptive and correlational statistics*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
DEFENSIVE STRATEGIES													
1. historical conspiracy theory	—												
2. contemporary conspiracy theory	0.64***	—											
3. system justification	0.16*	0.35***	—										
COLLECTIVE VICTIMHOOD													
4. historical	0.45***	0.56***	0.34***	—									
5. comparative	0.38***	0.39***	0.34***	0.54***	—								
COLLECTIVE WORLDVIEWS													
6. vulnerability	0.25***	0.32***	-0.15*	0.27***	0.16*	—							
7. distrust	0.58***	0.64***	0.28***	0.60***	0.38***	0.44***	—						
8. injustice	0.45***	0.69***	0.55***	0.64***	0.43***	0.32***	0.72***	—					
9. glorification	0.34***	0.40***	0.49***	0.44***	0.57***	0.11	0.41***	0.55***	—				
10. attachment	0.34***	0.38***	0.47***	0.40***	0.39***	-0.00	0.34***	0.50***	0.60	—			
11. political orientation	-0.25***	-0.46***	-0.44***	-0.39***	-0.39***	-0.03	-0.40***	-0.54***	-0.42***	-0.36***	—		
12. conspiracy mentality	0.45***	0.30***	-0.18**	0.26***	0.18**	0.46***	0.36***	0.20**	0.16*	0.08	0.02	—	
13. age	0.18**	0.18**	0.13	0.16*	0.04	-0.08	0.25***	0.11	0.10	0.27***	-0.17**	-0.03	—
14. education	-0.04	-0.01	0.06	-0.03	-0.04	-0.10	0.04	-0.02	-0.02	0.05	-0.10	-0.20**	0.59***
M	3.51	3.66	3.19	3.98	3.05	3.81	3.04	3.24	2.72	4.58	6.21	0.60	32.78
SD	2.09	2.33	1.44	1.49	1.29	1.67	1.48	1.63	1.24	1.55	2.34	0.21	13.78

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

tributed to the nature of the questionnaire: several items explicitly portray politicians and the government as conspirators, inherently undermining system justification.

As a second step, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses to assess the independent predictability of collective victimhood (historical and comparative) and group-level worldviews (vulnerability, distrust, and injustice) on defensive strategies (historical and contemporary conspiracy theories and system justification). National identification (glorification and attachment) and political orientation were also inserted into the regression analysis to control their effect (Table 3). The tolerance for all variables included in the analysis is above 0.1, and the VIF is less than 5, indicating low to moderate multicollinearity. The results show that comparative victimhood beliefs were associated with historical conspiracy theories within defensive strategies (β = .15, p = .039). However, none of the other defensive strategies shows a significant relationship with the two forms of collective victimhood beliefs (p > .05). Perceived vulnerability negatively (β = -.20, p < .001), while injustice positively (β = .54, p < .001) predicted system justification. The historical and contemporary conspiracy theories were predicted by distrust (β = .38, p < .001, β = .26, p < .001, respectively). Furthermore, perceived injustice was connected with contemporary conspiracy theories (β = .54, p < .001). Glorification was positively associated with system justification (β = .24, p = .003) and political orientation was positively correlated with historical conspiracy theorizing (β = .14, p = .041).

Path Analysis for Examining Indirect Effects

Path analysis further examined the effect of collective victimhood beliefs on defensive strategies to reveal the underlying mechanism. Based on the regression models and the theoretical assumptions, we tested the mediation of group-level worldviews between collective victimhood beliefs and defensive strategies. The model included defensive strategies like historical and contemporary conspiracy theories and system justification as outcome variables; group-level worldviews (vulnera-

Table 3 *Standardized beta coefficients of predictors of defensive strategies*

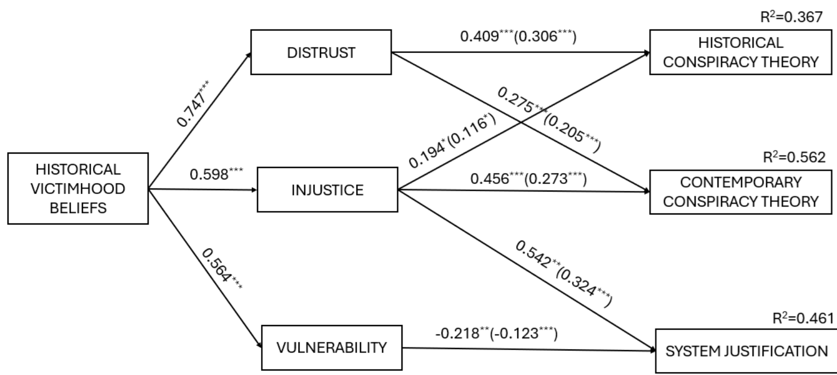
	System justification			Historical conspiracy theory			Contemporary conspiracy theory		
	β(SE)	*t*	*p*	*β(SE)*	*t*	*p*	*β(SE)*	*t*	*p*
historical cv	.05(.07)	0.76	.449	.11(.01)	1.41	.159	-.08(.01)	-1.20	.231
comparative cv	-.08(.09)	-1.27	.203	.15(.01)	2.08	.039	.08(.01)	1.47	.142
vulnerability	-.20(.06)	-3.59	< .001	-.03(.01)	-0.47	.642	.00(.01)	0.17	.867
distrust	-.10(.08)	-1.23	.121	.38(.01)	4.41	< .001	.26(.01)	3.84	< .001
injustice	.54(.08)	6.25	< .001	.06(.01)	0.59	.558	.54(.01)	7.07	< .001
glorification	.24(.09)	3.23	.001	.08(.01)	0.95	.341	.00(.01)	0.06	.948
attachment	.07(.06)	1.09	.275	.12(.01)	1.70	.090	.06(.01)	1.08	.280
political or	-.05(.04)	-0.77	.442	.14(.00)	2.05	.041	-.01(.00)	-1.29	.1873
	Adjusted R^2 = .47, F(8,214) = 26.002, p < .001			Adjusted R^2 = .39, F(8,214) = 17.145, p < .001			Adjusted R^2 = .60, F(8,214) = 41.911, p < .001		

Note. historical cv = historical collective victimhood, comparative cv = comparative historical victimhood, political or = political orientation

bility, injustice, and distrust) were added as mediators, while historical and comparative victimhood beliefs were employed as distinct predictive variables. The effect of the two types of victimhood beliefs was examined in separate models while controlling for attachment identification and political orientation. The decision not to control for glorification was based on the premise that the mediators in the model (vulnerability, injustice, and distrust) are assumed to be shaped by collective victimhood beliefs, which may inherently encompass aspects of glorification (e.g., moral superiority). Including glorification as a control variable could risk obscuring the nuanced roles of these mediators by over-adjusting for a variable closely related to the predictors. Based on the multiple regression analyses, we inserted only one direct connection between comparative victimhood beliefs and historical conspiracy theory. The results showed that the model with the predictor of comparative victimhood belief exhibits a poor fit, χ^2 (5) = 79.31, p < 0.001, CFI = .96, TLI = .74, RMSEA = .19, 90% CI [.16 - .23], SRMR = .07. Perceived distrust and injustice predicted both historical (β = .796, SE = .028, p < .001; β = .531, SE = .023, p = .004, respectively) and contemporary conspiracy theory (β = .322, SE = .009, p < .001; β = .516, SE = .010, p < .001, respectively). Vulnerability negatively (β = -.208, SE = .062, p < .001) and perceived injustice positively affected system justification (β = .534, SE = .076, p < .001). Comparative collective victimhood belief associated with all the group-level worldviews (for injustice β = .429, SE = .131, p < .001; for distrust β = .557, SE = .125, p < .001; and for vulnerability β = .468, SE = .096, p < .001) but did not exhibit a direct effect on historical conspiracy theory (β = -.424, SE = .052, p = .172).

After replacing the predictor variables with historical collective victimhood beliefs, the model indices improved significantly and demonstrated acceptable fit based on robust estimation: χ^2 (6) = 63.20, p < .001, CFI = .99, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .11, 90% CI [.08 - .13], SRMR = .04. Historical collective victimhood beliefs positively associated with all three group-level worldviews (for vulnerability β = .564, SE = .076, p < .001, for distrust β = .747, SE = .068, p < .001, for injustice β = .598, SE =.072, p < .001). Perceived distrust and injustice predicted both historical (β = .409, SE = .009, p < .001; β = .194, SE = .010, p = .016, respectively) and contemporary conspiracy theory (β = .275, SE = .009, p < .001; β = .456, SE = .011, p < .001, respectively). Furthermore, perceived injustice positively (β = .542, SE = .074, p < .001), while vulnerability negatively (β = -.218, SE = .064, p < .001) predicted system justification. Concerning the indirect effect, vulnerability negatively (β = - .123, SE = .041, p = .001), while perceived injustice positively (β = .324, SE = .063, p < .001) mediated the effect of historical victimhood on system justification. Historical victimhood was also associated with both contemporary and historical conspiracy theory via perceived injustice (β = .273, SE = .009, p < .001; β = .116, SE = .008, p < .001, respectively) and intergroup distrust (β = .205, SE = .008, p < .001; β = .306, SE = .008, p < .001) (see Figure 2).

A bootstrap analysis with 1,000 resamples was conducted to compare the impact of the indirect effects. The analysis revealed that the indirect effect of historical victim beliefs on historical conspiracy theory via distrust was significantly stronger than via injustice (Δb = 0.029, 95% CI [-0.057, -0.002]. The results suggest that while both paths (via distrust and injustice) contribute to the historical conspiracy theory, the mediating role of distrust is more prominent. Nevertheless, the indirect effect via distrust did not differ significantly between contemporary and historical conspiracy theory (b = 0.011, SE = 0.015, 95% CI [-0.008, 0.034]. For contemporary conspiracy



Note. Indirect effects are indicated in parentheses.

Figure 2 Path model for the relationship between historical victimhood beliefs and defensive strategies.

theory, the analysis did not reveal significant differences between the two indirect pathways (*Δ*b = 0.012, SE = 0.014, 95% CI [-0.016, 0.040] suggesting a similar effect of historical victim beliefs on contemporary conspiracy theory via distrust and injustice. However, the effect of historical victim beliefs via injustice was significantly stronger on contemporary compared to historical conspiracy theory (*Δ*b = -0.030, SE = 0.021, 95% CI [-0.053, -0.011].

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine the effect of collective victimhood beliefs on defensive strategies such as conspiracy theories and system justification and the mediational role of group-level worldviews. A unique contribution of this study was to examine the relationship between comparative victim beliefs (i.e., exclusive and inclusive beliefs) well documented in the literature (see Noor et al., 2017) and historically based victim beliefs (e.g., invisibility of past suffering and a sense of betrayal) specific to the Central Eastern European region (see Szabó, 2020). Explorative factor analysis revealed that the two types of collective victimhood beliefs are distinct, enabling the separate examination of their effect on defensive strategies through path analysis. The model using comparative victim beliefs as predictors showed a poorer fit compared to the model using historical victim beliefs as predictors, implying that the effect of collective victimization on defensive strategies is more meaningful when these beliefs are embedded in the cultural-historical context of the group. The result highlights the importance of context and victimhood beliefs that are aligned with a given sociohistorical context, also stressed by recent studies (Ivanović et al., 2025; Obradović et al., 2025; Vollhardt et al., 2021). In what follows, we will focus on the model with historical victim beliefs as predictor, as it exhibited a better fit.

Consistent with the literature and our first hypothesis, we found a positive association between historical victim beliefs and

group-level worldviews, as demonstrated by the zero-order correlations and path analysis. The results indicate that individuals with a high level of historical victimhood beliefs are more likely to exhibit distrust toward other nations, possess a heightened perception of unfair treatment against their ingroup, and are more susceptible to future threats to the ingroup. The second hypothesis posited that collective victimhood beliefs influence defensive strategies and that this influence is mediated by worldviews. The results confirmed that worldviews indeed mediate the effect of historical victim beliefs, although the extent and nature of this mediation varied. We found that distrust and perceived injustice mediated the positive effect of historical victimhood beliefs on both historical and contemporary conspiracy theories. However, the indirect effect of historical victim beliefs via distrust exerted a significantly stronger influence on historical conspiracy theories than via injustice. Moreover, indirect effects via distrust did not differ between the contemporary and historical conspiracy theory. In contrast, while no significant differences were found between the indirect effects (of distrust and injustice) for contemporary conspiracy theory, the effect via injustice was significantly stronger on contemporary conspiracy theory compared to historical conspiracy theory.

Among the group-level worldviews, distrust is one of the most salient consequences of collective victimhood (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; Pantazi et al., 2022) and also a core characteristic of conspiracy theory (Frenken & Imhoff, 2023; Thielmann & Hilbig, 2023), which may provide a common ground for the association between collective victimhood and conspiracy theory. Yet, the more substantial link with historical conspiracy theory implies that distrust, as a deeply rooted and generalized suspicion toward others, aligns well with the backward-looking perspective, as it reinforces the belief that outgroups have historically conspired against the ingroup and conveys essential information about other groups to future generations, such as the former being untrustworthy. On the other hand, perceived injustice seems to be a stronger driver for contemporary conspiracy thinking, as it is more context-dependent, focusing on specific perceived wrongs and addressing ongoing grievances rather than the conspirators themselves.

While vulnerability also positively correlated with historical victim beliefs, it did not mediate the effect of victimhood beliefs on endorsing conspiracy theories but did so on system justification. Vulnerability is a core belief a group may feel after a traumatic event (see Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; Plotkin-Amrami & Brunner, 2015) and in contrast to our findings most research found that vulnerability favors the belief in conspiracy theories (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2022; van Prooijen, 2020). One possible explanation of this controversy may be that while vulnerability increases a sense of susceptibility to future danger and reflects insecurity, it does not necessarily drive the active search for explanatory frameworks like conspiracy theories directly but through distrust or perceived injustice **–** as suggested by the small bivariate correlation between historical victim beliefs and vulnerability. On the other hand, the negative association between vulnerability and system justification suggests that individuals experiencing vulnerability may perceive the system as failing to provide safety and justice. When the nation's values, future or security are at stake, it raises an interior question of trust in system stability instead of looking for responsibility among outgroups.

The present study offered several novel contributions to better understand the phenomena of collective victimhood. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of examining vic-

timization beliefs embedded within specific cultural contexts, extending the focus beyond comparative victimization perceptions. Secondly, while confirming previous findings on the worldviews associated with collective victimhood, our study, to the best of our knowledge, is the first to demonstrate that these worldviews play a crucial mediating role between victimization and defensive strategies, such as conspiracy theories and system justification. Moreover, our findings revealed that the mediating role of different worldviews varies in both magnitude and direction with respect to defensive strategies. These findings provide valuable insight into the nuanced interplay between collective victim beliefs, worldviews, and defensive strategies, which might contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of collective victimhood on socio-political or geopolitical attitudes.

Conclusion

There is a growing trend in politics employing victimhood as a political narrative tool to mobilize, shift blame or claim a moral position. Utilizing past traumatic events in current political discourse can function as analogical reasoning, an inferential process in which the characteristics of a current event are deduced by identifying similarities with past events. Particularly, when faced with uncertainty in new frameworks for understanding and decision-making, leaders often rely on analogies (Flanik, 2017). Analogical reasoning simplifies complex events by offering familiar frameworks, enabling individuals to interpret and assign meaning to ongoing situations (Kalhousová et al., 2024). For instance, Szabó and Csertő (2023) found that individuals with stronger exclusive victimhood beliefs are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward the EU, and this relationship was mediated by the perceived similarity between the EU and historical perpetrators against Hungary. Hungarian political rhetoric often reinforces this perception by framing the EU as a contemporary continuation of external forces undermining Hungary's sovereignty, a narrative rooted in collective historical victimhood (see Benazzo, 2017; Petrović, 2019).

Worldviews activated by reference to historical suffering can influence individuals' attitudes toward contemporary events, even those without direct historical analogies, as long as they align with the worldviews formed by historical suffering. Including historical victimization into political discourse can frame the current social and political context within the lens of past grievances (de Saint-Laurent & Obradović, 2019; Ivanović et al., 2025), thereby constraining the interpretation of present events. Moreover, in this process, the worldviews associated with victimization not only facilitate defensive strategies, such as conspiracy theories, but also may increase individuals' susceptibility to victimhood-congruent conspiracy theories propagated by the political elite (see Krekó & Enyedi, 2018; Langer, 2021).

Limitation and Future Direction

It is important to note that the present study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. One key limitation is the inability to establish causal relationships between the variables due to the study's design. Future studies could address this by testing the model in an experimental setup. Additionally, replicating the study in different historical and cultural contexts would be valuable to assess the robustness and generalizability of the model.

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